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# The Association for Mormon Letters

Volume 1

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# Of Hymns, Herbert, and the Aesthetics of Faith

John S. Tanner<sup>1</sup>

## I

LET ME BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION. Over the past two years, I've often winced with embarrassment when I read on my vita or in public announcements: "John Tanner, President of the Association for Mormon Letters." Furthermore, no one was more disappointed than I that Richard Cracroft couldn't assume the presidency of AML (making it necessary for me to serve an extra term), and none is more relieved to welcome Bert Wilson as the new president tonight. In this valediction, I feel it's time to come clean publicly about my private chagrin to be your president.

Now let me quickly clarify the reason for my chagrin, so no one misinterprets me. My embarrassment has absolutely nothing to do with my esteem for the Association—whose purposes I believe in and have tried to advance, and whose members I've grown to love. It has to do solely with my own absurdly inadequate qualifications for the job. I possess such a small claim, judged either as artist or critic, to preside over an association devoted to Mormon letters. My own accomplishments in the field are laughably slender—a few essays, a couple of poems, and a hymn. A pretty paltry vita for your president!

Aware of my meager credentials, I've had a devil of a time deciding what to talk about tonight. Preparing this talk has focused two years' feelings of inadequacy. So I've finally decided to talk about an issue I can speak of with some (albeit modest) first-hand experience: writing hymns and, more broadly, devotional poetry. To illustrate my remarks, I'll draw on examples from seventeenth-century devotional literature—a field in which I'm more at home than either Mormon letters or hymnody.

Now I realize that an address on hymns may sound about as appealing as the annual high councilor's talk on tithing. But before I'm through, I hope to show that the hymn-form raises fascinating aesthetic questions—questions significant to both Mormon and Christian aesthetics. To ask what makes a good hymn is to be forced to confront, in unique and urgent ways, the ancient rivalry between beauty and truth. It is to be led to wonder if and how beauty adds value to religious expression, Mormon or otherwise. It is to worry if and how purity of intention (the beauty of a human heart, as it were) can be considered in aesthetic judgments along with excellence of execution. It is to wonder how God measures the beauty of artifacts dedicated to him.

And it is to discover that aesthetic questions regarding hymns and devotional poetry are deeply enmeshed in theological ones. For works of art (and note the word "works") inescapably participate in theological issues about works and faith. Tonight, I want especially want to draw out the implications for aesthetics of the doctrine of salvation by faith.

## II

Most literary critics feel little but contempt for the hymn as an art form. Hymns are almost never included in literary anthologies—an exclusion not without some justification. Hymn language can be formulaic and clichéd; hymn sentiments, vague and conventional; hymn meters, numbingly regular. Indeed, every formal feature of the hymn may appear purposely designed to produce verse to be endured rather than enjoyed. At their worst, hymns suffer from the defects common to much religious verse—such as the moralistic doggerel that fills many a ward newsletter and sacrament meet-



ing program. If I'm feeling uncharitable, I sometimes silently amuse myself with a little game; perhaps you've indulged in it, too. I try to predict the next rhyming word of an unfamiliar hymn or over-the-pulpit "inspirational" verse. Usually, it's not hard: fear-near, love-above or dove, path-hath, raised-praised, God-trod, rod, or sod, and the ubiquitous Lord-word. One often hears the rhyme limping lamely down the corridor long before it enters the room.

Of course, not all hymns are so awful. Moreover, it's unfair to judge a genre by its worst examples, for one can find bad examples of any art form, including the loftiest. Most epics, for instance, have been colossal failures. Literary history is littered with failed imitations of Homer, Virgil, and Milton. This doesn't mean that the epic is a flawed genre—only that it's a very difficult one. Similarly, the immense volume of bad hymns may testify not to the intrinsic weakness of the form but to its difficulty.

The sheer volume of hymns also says something about the genre's popularity. As a mainly popular, rather than high-culture art form, most hymns are composed by untrained practitioners. This can lead to amateurish, inept texts—but it need not always be so. Many of the most moving, well-loved, beautiful hymns are anonymous or have been penned by literary unknowns; one need not be "trained for the ministry" to speak beautifully in sacred song. Further, hymns texts have also been written by acknowledged first-rate poets (such as Herbert, Milton, and Auden), as well as by first-rate hymnists (such as Watts and Wesley). Considered historically, the hymn boasts a checkered but venerable and ancient pedigree—one that stretches back at least to the psalms.

Like the psalms, hymns are often cast as poetic prayers. As verse prayers, many hymns belong to a subspecies of religious literature known as devotional poetry. In contrast to religious poetry generally, devotional poetry is not written so much about God as to God. It is poetry deliberately designed to be heard (or at least overheard) by God.<sup>2</sup> The aesthetic questions I want to raise tonight concern poems whose primary audience is God and whose rhetorical situation is that of prayer. Though not all hymns fit this rhetorical model, many do. This, more than anything else, makes them so instructive as aesthetic objects.

From this rhetorical posture emerge a number of compelling aesthetic questions. For example, consider the questions that arise as we inquire into the satisfactions that the devotional poem creates for its putative audience, God. What value does God place upon the formal elegance of the utterance? Does he take special pleasure in the beauty of rhyme, rhythm, image? Does an immaculately polished poem please him more than rude, inelegant but passionate stammerings from the heart? Is eloquence a learned human skill or a divine gift? If it is a gift, what delight does God take in receiving back from us something he himself has given? Is it presumptuous of humans to offer God our words as if they were the product of our own skill rather than the evidence of his divine grace?

Consider, too, the questions that arise as we inquire into the satisfactions that the devotional poet takes from his text. Though hymns may begin in pure, devotional feeling, they usually end in hours of laborious shaping as the poet makes the lines rhyme, scan, and sing. In the gap that opens between raw emotion and crafted text lie potential spiritual perils. For can a speaker whose attention is necessarily fixed upon technique honestly represent himself as having his eyes lifted up and his heart stretched out singlemindedly to God? Does the poet's concern for craft adulterate the purity of his religious motive? Is poetic prayer a contradiction in terms because the purity of one's concern to communicate pure feelings to

*God is necessarily compromised by self-regard for the shape of one's speech? And what about the paradox of publishing (much more, getting pay or worldly honor for) one's devotions?*<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, these questions about the satisfactions of the speaker and audience are most vexing where devotional poetry most approximates private prayer. Prayer may be, of course, public as well; it may properly aim at communal utterance, so, too, hymns legitimately consult the needs of a listening, singing public, whom they speak not only for but also to. However, even public prayers presume the main audience to be God. If the speaker tries to impress his or her human audience, we rightly call the sincerity

of the utterance into question. The same applies to hymn texts and every other form of devotional poetry. Exhibitionism, insincerity, and vainglory introduce sour notes that spoil the work. In all devotional poetry, the satisfactions of the poet and God are always at issue, whether it is private or public devotions.

### III

These issues were much debated in the seventeenth century, the great age of devotional poetry and also a period of keen controversies about the proper style of worship. Much ink was spilled over whether sermons should be plain or ornate, whether prayers should be spontaneous or set, and so forth.<sup>4</sup> Devotional poets were equally self-conscious about style. Andrew Marvell, for example, probes the problems of devotional poetry in a poem called "The Coronet," which imagines writing devotional poetry as an act of weaving a crown of praise for God. But as the devotional poet begins to gather garlands from which to fashion his verse, he detects the serpent of self-interest lurking among the flowers he would lace into a beautiful crown of verse:

*And now when I have summed up all my store,  
Thinking (so I myself deceive)  
So rich a chaplet thence to weave  
As never yet the King of Glory wore:  
Alas I find the Serpent old  
That, twining in his speckled breast,  
With wreathes of fame and interest.<sup>5</sup>*

Notice that at the very moment of most excitement about his composing beautiful devotional verse ("As never yet the King of Glory wore"), the speaker discovers that the effort to celebrate the Lord in poetry has led to self-celebration. So he resolves to submit his poetry to divine destruction in order that the Lord may also slay the serpent pride: "shatter too him with my curious frame, / And let these wither, so he may die" (ll. 22-23).

Thus, "The Coronet" is a devotional poem describing the impossibility of writing devotional poems; no wonder that it's Marvell's only poem in this genre. Marvell acknowledges that it takes a purer heart than his to disentangle egoism ("fame and interest")

from devotion. He shows how and why the heart is inescapably at issue in devotional poetry, and makes us wonder if any one wishing to weave a wreath for God could boast a heart so pure.

If anyone can, it is George Herbert, the seventeenth-century devotional poet with the purest and sweetest voice. Like Marvell, Herbert foregrounds the vexing aesthetic issues that complicate the act of writing devotional poetry. Also like Marvell, he fashions brilliant devotional poems out of the difficulty of writing devotional poetry. Let me illustrate Herbert's explorations of these dilemmas with three poems—"Jordan (II)," "The Forerunners," and "A True Hymn."<sup>6</sup> Together, these poems articulate a radical critique of traditional aesthetics—one that, though I don't wholly subscribe to, deserves to be taken into account in any Mormon aesthetic.

First, "Jordan (II)." Both of Herbert's "Jordan" poems describe his attempt to baptize his muse in the Jordan, converting secular rhetorical skills to sacred purposes. Herbert was the Public Orator of Cambridge University; as such, he was responsible to address the king on behalf of the university. Initially he supposes that it will be an easy matter to employ his impressive rhetorical skills in the service of a new master. In "Jordan (II)" one can hear Herbert's burgeoning pride as he contemplates the metaphors and other rhetorical flourishes he'll use "to clothe the sun." One can also hear his keen self-mockery as he realizes that he has begun to treat his gift of beautiful language like a prostitute, "decking the sense as if to sell." His new master cares much more about fine feelings than fine phrases. Indeed, this master requires the heart, first and foremost, and is not to be dazzled by displays of eloquence or wit:

*When first my lines of heav'nly joys made mention,  
Such was their lustre, they did so excel,  
That I sought out quaint words, and trim inventions;  
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,  
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,  
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell.*

*Thousands of notions in my brain did run,  
Offering their service, if I were not sped:  
I often blotted what I had begun;*

*This was not quick enough, and that was dead.  
Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sun;  
Much less those joys which trample on his head.*

*As flames do work and wind, when they ascend,  
So did I weave myself into the sense.  
But while I bustled, I might hear a friend  
Whisper, How wide is all this long pretence!  
There is in love a sweetness ready penned:  
Copy out only that, and save expense.*

"Jordan (II)" presumes that good feelings, faithfully recorded, possess a beauty ("sweetness") superior to labored but insincere poetry. Beyond this, the friend (probably meant to figure the Lord), seems to honor a good heart before a ready pen. Beauty lies in love itself; Christ cares more about heart-work than brain-work.

In Christianity, it is axiomatic, as Herbert says elsewhere, that the "chief thing God . . . requires is the heart, and the spirit, and to worship him in truth, and in spirit" ("A True Hymn"). Herbert draws out the consequences of this doctrine for the aesthetics of devotional literature—and nowhere more poignantly than in "The Forerunners." In its turns and counterturns, we witness the poet working out what it means that the Lord cares more about a well-tuned heart than a well-turned phrase; we see the poet recognizing that his simple feelings of love for God outweigh his skill in giving them voice.

Before I quote the poem, I need to explain its controlling metaphor. When a monarch set out on a progress, runners went before him as advance-men, chalking with white marks the lintels of the homes in which he or she would stay. Naturally, the monarch and his entourage would be given the most elegant rooms in the house as well as costly feasts; this could bankrupt an insufficiently well-heeled country squire. Herbert imagines the white hairs of old age on his head to be the sign that the king (Christ) is coming to take possession of his earthly dwelling (body). He regrets that the king must take his showiest rooms (his wit, his rhetorical skill), but rejoices that he has been left his best room, after all: his heart, his testimony, and his love.

*The harbingers are come. See, see their mark;  
White is their colour, and behold my head.  
But must they have my brain? must they dispart  
Those sparkling notions, which therein were bred?  
Must dullness turn me to a clod?  
Yet they have left me, Thou art still my God.*

*Good men ye be, to leave me my best room,  
Ev'n all my heart, and what is lodged there:  
I pass not, I, what of the rest become,  
So Thou art still my God, be out of fear.  
He will be pleased with my ditty;  
And if I please him, I write fine and witty.*

*Farewell sweet phrases, lovely metaphors.  
But will ye leave me thus? when ye before  
Of stews and brothels only knew the doors,  
Then did I wash you with my tears, and more,  
Brought you to Church well dressed and clad:  
My God must have my best, ev'n all I had.*

*Lovely enchanting language, sugar-cane,  
Honey of roses, whither wilt thou fly?  
Hath some fond lover ticed thee to thy blame?  
And wilt thou leave the Church, and love a sty?  
Fie, thou wilt soil thy brodered coat,  
And hurt thyself, and him that sings the note.*

*Let foolish lovers, if they love dung,  
With canvas, not arras, clothe their shame:  
Let folly speak in her own native tongue.  
True beauty dwells on high: ours is a flame  
But borrowed thence to light us thither.  
Beauty and beauteous words should go together.*

*Yet, if you go, I pass not; take your way:  
For, Thou art still my God, is all that ye  
Perhaps with more embellishment can say.  
Go birds of spring: let winter have his fee;  
Let a bleak paleness chalk the door,  
So all within be livelier than before.*

Still enamored of "sweet phrases" and "lovely enchanting language," the poet regrets their loss even as he bids them farewell. His tone is elegiac. An elegy to eloquence, the poem yearns for a world of simple platonic correspondences, when "beauty and beauteous words . . . go together." But if heaven forces a choice

between lovely metaphors and love for God, there is no question of which is more important: "So *Thou art still my God*, be out of fear. / He will be pleased with my ditty; / And if I please him, I write fine and witty."

Herbert's strongest, most unqualified statement that feeling matters more than form occurs in a poem entitled "A True Hymn." In it, Herbert depicts his heart as a rather awkward, fumbling speaker, moved by love for God but made inarticulate by the intensity of that love—barely capable of speech at all, let alone of eloquence:

*My joy, my life, my crown!  
My heart was meaning all the day,  
Somewhat it fain would say:  
And still it runneth, mutt'ring up and down  
With only this, My joy, my life, my crown.*

*Yet slight not these few words:  
If truly said, they may take part  
Among the best in art.  
The fineness which a hymn or psalm affords,  
Is, when the soul unto the lines accords.*

*He who craves all the mind,  
And all the soul, and strength, and time,  
If the words only rhyme,  
Justly complains, that somewhat is behind  
To make his verse, or write a hymn in kind.*

*Whereas if th' heart be moved,  
Although the verse be somewhat scant,  
God doth supply the want,  
As when th' heart says (sighing to be approved)  
O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, Loved.*

This poem articulates a genuinely radical critique of traditional aesthetic canons: namely, that a simple testimony or expression of love, "If truly said . . . may take part / Among the best in art." I think Christians generally, and Mormons specifically, need to confront questions raised by Herbert's aesthetic. Herbert invites us, as believers, to rethink not only the values we admire in literary texts but the values we adopt in the text of our lives as we negotiate the difficult choice between, as Yeats put it, "perfection of the life or of the work."<sup>6</sup>

## IV

Now let me briefly touch on the theological basis for Herbert's Christian aesthetic.<sup>7</sup> In all three of these poems, Herbert privileges the heart. He asserts that God cares more about how well we love him than how artfully. Behind this claim lies the Reformers' anti-elitist doctrine of salvation by faith. The following statements by Herbert's Protestant contemporaries are illuminating. Richard Baxter argued that "thousands believe savingly, that have not wit enough to tell you truly what believing is; and many thousands have the spirit that know not what the Spirit is." Similarly, Bunyan asserts:

*I am fully convinced of it, that it is possible for a soul that can scarce give a man an answer, but with great confusion as to method, I say it is possible for them to have a thousand times more grace, and so to be more in the love and favour of the Lord than some who, by virtue of the gift of knowledge, can deliver themselves like angels.*

Richard Hollinworth noted that believers are often like children who feel that "their affections [are] . . . too big for their expressions," but they should take consolation in the spirit of adoption, for "the Father hath compassion on his sick Child, though it cannot speak articulately, nor speak at all, but only with sighs, groans, looks upon his Father." Likewise, William Dewsbury comforts the inarticulate believer thus: "And thou faithful Babe, though thou stutter and stammer forth a few words in the dread of the Lord, they are accepted" (in Strier 205-6).

These sentiments coincide with Herbert's defense of the childish heart, not only in "The True Hymn" but elsewhere. In a poem appropriately entitled "Faith," Herbert explicitly draws the anti-elitist moral of salvation by faith:

*A peasant may believe as much  
As a great clerk, and reach the highest stature.  
Thou dost make proud knowledge bend and crouch  
While grace fills up uneven nature. (ll. 29-32)*

Similarly, Herbert depicts grace as comparable to the fabled philosopher's stone of which the alchemists dreamed: whatever grace "touches and owns," how-

ever low and mean, is changed to pure gold, in the economy of heaven ("The Elixir").

Herbert's position, like that of these seventeenth-century divines, ultimately derives from a famous passage about prayer in Paul's epistle to the Romans: "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26). Paul's doctrine is echoed across the church every fast Sunday, as Latter-day Saints experience feelings too deep, too high, and too subtle for language to capture. The same sentiment is articulated in James Talmage's ironically eloquent words about the nature of true eloquence:

*It is well known that prayer is not compounded of words, words that may fail to express what one desires to say, words that so often cloak inconsistencies, words that have no deeper source than the physical organs of speech, words that may be spoken to impress mortal ears. The dumb may pray, and that too with the eloquence that prevails in heaven. Prayer is made up of heart throbs and the righteous yearnings of the soul.<sup>8</sup>*

These sentiments are full of hope for those, like me, who often feel our hearts full of songs we cannot sing.<sup>9</sup> If, however, this argument is pushed far enough, one might wonder why words should be used in prayer at all. What value is language—never mind artful language—in prayers, hymns, or devotional literature if all that matters are feelings?

## V

This brings me to the limitations of Herbert's position as applied to a Mormon aesthetic. The caveats I want to make flow from my sense that Herbert's position is excessively polarized. The poems we have looked at draw sharp distinctions between faith and works, form and content, feeling and speaking, etc. Such sharp dichotomies oversimplify both religion and aesthetics. A more integrated, sounder theory would be less energized by pitting the heart against the tongue, inward emotion against outward expression. It would not equate poetry with its formal features (as metaphors

and lovely phrases) or with eloquence, especially if eloquence is understood to mean merely "embellishment" (cf. "Forerunners"). Metaphors are not detachable from abstract meanings, nor is the poet always already in possession of his meaning prior to the poem, so that his verse merely dresses up something he could say more plainly in prose, as "Jordan (II)" implies.<sup>10</sup>

Rather, poetry is often an act of discovering truth—or, if "truth" is too old-fashioned, at least "what will suffice."<sup>11</sup> Feeling may come first and feeling remains after representation, inexhaustible by discourse. Still, humans need language to clarify feelings. This is true of both private and public devotional speech. The words of a prayer as of a hymn make flesh invisible feelings. However imperfect, language "gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.16-17). We are most conscious of language's inadequacy to represent "being" when our feelings are most full and complex. Great literature, however, impresses us by how nearly it succeeds in the impossible task of conferring shape and sense upon life, which is always surplus to representation. This rich fullness is especially present in artistic representation—painting, sculpture, music, literature. To acknowledge this, however, is to open up the question of how and why literature succeeds beyond ordinary speech. And this, in turn, opens the back door to formalistic aesthetic criteria, with all the problems Herbert discerns about measuring beauty by external execution rather than by internal intent.

I wonder, however, if even Herbert might concede the validity of applying formalist standards to devotional art, so long as formal beauties are seen as clearly secondary to the beauty of the writer's soul. For pushed to its logical extreme, Herbert's view could be construed to authorize only pregnant, rich silences punctuated by heartfelt expressions of love and testimony. Herbert's practice, which gives us some rather extraordinary artifacts, is richer than his theory (or at least the reduction of it that emphasizes only feeling). After all, the very poems that celebrate the superiority of feeling still embody the argument in carefully wrought artifacts.

Despite these caveats, I believe Herbert's exploration of these issues has much to recommend it to an association devoted to Mormon letters. Herbert's Christian aesthetic consistently reverses the Greek maxim that

art is long and life is short. No, he insists, life is long—indeed, it is eternal—while art is transient. Therefore, it doesn't ultimately matter what becomes of his poems so long as his soul is right before God (see "Virtue" and "Life"). The best he can hope for his poems is that they might do somebody else some good. If you think my manuscript "may turn to the advantage of any dejected, poor soul," Herbert told his executor, "let it be made public"; if not, burn it: "for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies."<sup>12</sup>

Herbert's Christian aesthetic affirms that a perfected soul is an infinitely superior accomplishment to a perfected manuscript—and all that ultimately matters. His position counters the endemic Romantic heresy (promulgated by Shelley, among others) that the artist lives beyond moral judgment and that great artistic achievement compensates for moral failure. God will no doubt ask Shakespeare about how he treated his wife and children, and will certainly call Shelley to account for how he treated his. Likewise, in God's eyes taking bread and casseroles to needy neighbors may be as beautiful a work as writing the great Mormon novel.

Herbert's revisionist Christian aesthetic challenges those of us who, like Herbert himself, deeply love poetry, eloquence, art. His view may help us define the special beauties of a great deal of early Mormon letters—which, as Gene England has often noted, generally fall outside traditional belletristic genres, occurring instead in journals, diaries, letters, sermons, oral narratives, and, yes, even hymns.

I find that Herbert's anti-elitist Christian concerns appeal deeply to my particular configuration of Mormon values and recommend his views to the association as we seek to define a Mormon aesthetic. Surely Herbert is right that a simple phrase, such as *I love you*, "if truly said . . . may take part / Among the best in art." May I therefore say to you, my talented friends, that I love you—adding that what I admire most in you, or in anyone, is the resplendent beauty of a truly Christ-like soul.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John S. Tanner, currently Associate Academic Vice President at BYU and Professor of English, has published widely in the field of literary criticism. His most recent work is a book on

Milton and Kierkegaard entitled *Anxiety in Eden* (Oxford University Press, 1992). He is also the author of a hymn text in the 1985 hymnal. This presidential address was delivered at the Association for Mormon Letters annual meeting in March 1988 at the home of Steven P. Sondrup. The tune of his "One night in a Stable" is set to the traditional melody, "The Ash Grove," to an arrangement copyright by Wayne Hooper.

<sup>2</sup>See A. D. Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante, and St. John* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>The same set of concerns apply to other lyrics, such as the love poem. See Helen Gardner's "Introduction," *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

<sup>4</sup>For some accounts of seventeenth-century religious controversies over style, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939; reprint, ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 331-62; L. A. Sacsk, *The Literary Temper of the English Puritans* (1961; reprint ed., New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 39-56; Kenneth B. Murdock, *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England* (Harvard University Press, 1949), 34-65; and N. H. Keeble, *Richard Baxter: Puritan Man of Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 48-68.

<sup>5</sup>"The Coronet," *Andrew Marvell: Selected Poetry*, edited by Frank Kermode (New York: Signet Classics, 1967), ll. 9-16.

<sup>6</sup>All citations to Herbert are from *George Herbert and Henry Vaughan*, edited by Louis L. Martz (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), cited hereafter in the text by poem.

<sup>7</sup>This section summarizes arguments developed at length in the chapter, "The Heart's Privileges: Emotion," in Richard Strier's *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). All quotations of Protestant Reformers are from Strier's text.

<sup>8</sup>*Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to Holy Scriptures Both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988 printing), 222.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. "There is Sunshine in My Soul Today," *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, no. 227. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), no. 227.

<sup>10</sup>See Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* for a similar theory of poetry as decoration. Herbert was relying on a common Renaissance stereotype in characterizing poetry as sweetened truth.

<sup>11</sup>See Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play by Wallace Stevens*, edited by Holy Steven (New York: Random House, 1971), 174-75.

<sup>12</sup>Isaac Walton, *Life of George Herbert in The Harvard Classics* (New York: P. F. Collier and Sons Corporation, 1937), 414.

# The Power of the Word

William A. Wilson<sup>1</sup>

MEMBERS OF THE ASSOCIATION for Mormon Letters: Greetings from the rainy fields of western Oregon. I understand now why people who live here for any length of time develop webbed feet. I would like to be with you on this day when we celebrate our achievements in Mormon letters, honor those whose creative efforts have enriched our lives, and attempt through our study of their works to come to a better understanding of the culture that has produced us and, therefore, to a better understanding of ourselves.

I am pleased at this time, in absentia, to pass the presidency to Levi Peterson. One might wonder about the aims of this organization when the immediate past president, John Tanner, is an expert in the English Renaissance and when the retiring president, myself, is a folklorist whose principal publications have dealt with the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. Members will certainly breathe more easily now as the mantle passes to one whose prize-winning biography of Juanita Brooks and whose novel and short stories are all planted firmly in the cultural soil of Mormondom. But before I let that mantle slip completely away, I want to sneak in a few words about one of my favorite subjects, Mormon folklore, just as John Tanner used this same occasion last year to talk about hymns.

Before I do that, however, I want to remind members that in spite of remarkable progress in recent years, the cause we seek to advance—the development and appreciation of Mormon letters—remains suspect in the minds of many of our colleagues and that we must continue to support and defend the goals of this organization. Not long ago I discussed Levi's biography with one of these colleagues. He praised the book's writing style and the insights he had gained

from it, then paused and asked, "Who are we kidding anyway? Beyond a few specialists, who's really interested in Juanita Brooks?" His point was that, in spite of our illusions about ourselves, we are really a small and unimportant body of people whose creative writers and biographers exhaust their energies producing works of no enduring consequence, while the important matters of the larger society lie outside our awareness and usually outside of our abilities to handle them in significant ways.

When I returned to BYU a few years ago as chair of the English Department, I was surprised to find this same attitude prevalent among a number of our faculty—a fact which still bewilders me, considering the mission of BYU. One of these faculty, not yet aware of my sympathies, tried to enlist my help in curtailing the teaching of "Mormon literature" and denying it a legitimate position in the curriculum. My response made quite clear where my sympathies lay and will, I hope, still serve today as a defense of our work:

*I was not here when the issue came up, but I believe the department made a correct decision in creating a specialty in Mormon literature. In my judgment, what is at the heart of our discipline is not any one author or any one canon of literature but rather our fellow human beings struggling to endure in a world bent on their destruction and seeking in their artistic responses to this struggle the means to endure and, as Faulkner says, maybe even to prevail. I find that struggle no less significant nor the experience less moving when participated in by my Mormon ancestors or by my fellow Mormons today. While the bulk of literature growing out of our Mormon experience will not match in quality the major works we teach in our other classes, a lot of it*

*is good, and it is getting better. I think we have an obligation—especially at BYU [and I would add today, in the Association for Mormon Letters]—to introduce our students to the literature of their religious heritage. I also think we have an obligation to approach that literature as critically as possible and to work for its improvement.*

I am pleased to announce that, at BYU at least, those efforts have born rich fruit. Not only does Mormon literature continue to be an important course in our departmental offerings, it was approved in December 1988, as one of the few courses in the department which will carry general education credit.

I must confess that, as I engage in these struggles, the folklorist's part of my soul wants to cry out: "Why are you talking about the development of Mormon literature? We have always had a Mormon literature—those rich oral narratives that have existed almost from the beginning of the Church and have lifted spirits and moved people to action in the cause to which they have dedicated their lives." Just as I am bothered by those who argue that Mormon fiction, poetry, and biography form a subliterate genre of little importance, so, too, am I bothered by those Mormon literati who gather in small circles, read their works to each other, and speak disparagingly of their less-cultivated brothers and sisters and of the stories they tell.

Here comes that defense of folklore, then, that I promised to slip into this talk. Time will not allow a defense really. That will have to wait another day. I will simply try to illustrate how folk artistic performance works and to suggest that, if we want really to understand our culture and to honor the artistic impulses common to most of us, we must pay equal attention to both written and oral texts—a point that shouldn't be too hard to accept in our day of canon deconstruction and movement away from privileged discourse.

One of the stumbling blocks to our proper understanding of folklore as artistic expression has been our failure in the past to emphasize that the art of folklore lies not just in works made but in the *process* of making them—that is, in performance.

No matter how much advice a poet or writer of fiction may get from colleagues and no matter how

he or she attempts to shape lines of the work to communicate effectively with a specific audience, once the poem, short story, or novel is complete and committed to print, the exchange between writer and audience ends. Each person may respond differently to the work and may interpret it differently. But the words themselves, as they appear on the printed page, will ever remain the same. With folklore, there is no printed page. There is only the performance in which a song is sung, a tale told, a ritual enacted. The song, tale, or ritual are parts of the whole, but they are not the whole itself. The performance is the whole. The beginning and closing markers of a story do not just set off a narrative from other forms of communication; they set off the telling of the tale from other forms of behavior, a tale whose form and meaning are shaped by teller and listener alike as each responds to and gives feedback signals to the other. Thus in a very real sense the telling *is* the tale, the singing *is* the song, the enactment *is* the ritual.

The artistic tensions that develop as one reads a poem or a novel occur primarily between the reader and the lines on the written page and only indirectly, through these lines, between the reader and the poet or novelist. The artistic tensions that develop in a folklore performance occur directly and dynamically between listener and performer. We can record part of the performance and print it in a book as a folklore text; but in doing so, we give readers only a mutilated bit of reality. The real art of folklore and the real meaning of folklore lie in the performance of folklore. To attempt artistically to appreciate the telling of a story without participating in its performance is like trying artistically to enjoy a symphony by simply reading the musical score.

The important thing to remember is that, just as the different parts of a literary narrative or poem must work together in harmony if the work is to be artistically successful, so too must the different parts of a performance—the dynamic relationship of narrator and audience, the relationship of both narrator and audience to the social environment, and their mutual creation of a text to affect that environment—all these and other elements of the narrative situation must work together in harmony if the performance



is to be artistically successful. In the successful literary work and the successful narrative performance the final result will be the same—an artistic experience capable of affecting our emotions and of producing both pleasure and pain.

Unfortunately, I can't really demonstrate what I have just said because I can't produce a narrative performance. But I can at least describe one. I hope that you will, in the future, keep your own eyes open for storytelling events and will pay close attention to what happens in them, applying to them the principles I talk about here.

With Professor John B. Harris, I have for many years been collecting, studying, and enjoying the folklore of Mormon missionaries. Imagine, with me, that we are at a missionary zone conference in, let us say, North Carolina. On this occasion, missionaries have gathered in the mission center from their assigned cities, have listened much of the day to words of encouragement and exhortation from the mission president, have spent a couple hours breaking the tensions of their work in a vigorous softball game, have eaten a better dinner than usual, and now are gathered in the local chapel where they will spend the night on hard floors in sleeping bags brought with them for the occasion. (I am speaking here of the male missionaries because I know them best; sister missionaries will participate in their own storytelling events.)

Following a group prayer, a few missionaries zip themselves into their bags and try to sleep, but most still sit or lie on them, their stockinged feet stretched out comfortably, their omnipresent suit coats and dark ties draped over nearby chairs, their white shirt-sleeves rolled up to their elbows, and their shirt tails now and then pulled out over their belts. They talk of home, of school, of food, of girlfriends who may or may not wait the two years they are in the field, of past athletic achievements, of cars, of jobs, of their plans for the time when they return home again. Finally the talk drifts back to the world they must deal with each day—the world of missionary work.

As the evening passes, one missionary after another assumes the role of performer, and then moves back into the audience. The listeners may not know a particular story being told, but they know its form

and recognize the values the teller is trying to uphold or the effect he hopes to have on the audience. They expect him both to stay within the narrative bounds dictated by tradition and at the same time to perform well enough to excite their sympathies and persuade, or attempt to persuade, them to accept his point of view. In other words, they judge the competency of his performance. As they do so, they send back signals revealing their responses. He, in turn, adjusts his storytelling accordingly, manipulating the form and especially the style of his narration to make it as artistically successful, and therefore as persuasive, as possible.

On this occasion, the talk shifts eventually to the difficulties of tracting—of going from door to door trying to persuade people to let the missionaries in to present their message. The work has not been going well. Some of the fundamentalist churches in the area have generated considerable hostility against Mormons, and some missionaries have tracted days on end without getting into a house. An air of discouragement hangs in the room, and some of the young men wonder out loud if they ought to give up tracting altogether. One missionary, who has remained silent to this point interrupts: "Let me tell you about my friend who served in the Oklahoma mission." Then he narrates the following story:

*Two of his zone leaders were out tracting one night, and it was getting to be towards the end of evening, and the sun was just going down. They were both getting pretty tired. It had been a week where they were working a lot to try and get a lot of discussions taught. And nothing much had happened to them that day. And the younger companion, I guess, wanted to go home for the night. They decided they'd stay out a bit longer and do what they called "spirit tracting," or going by the spirit, instead of just knocking on every door, just feeling where they were guided to go. And so they went down this one block, and they tried a few houses and nothing much happened. And they got to the end of the one block and there was a house, and the younger companion said to the other one that he felt inspired to go to this house. So, the older companion said, "Well, that's kinda crazy cause there's no lights on; it looks like there's nobody home there;*

*there's no car in the driveway or anything." And the companion said, "Well, maybe there's someone downstairs watching T.V.; I still feel inspired to go there." So, the older companion finally agreed, "All right, let's go there and try it anyway"—just maybe to humor the younger one. But they went and knocked on the door and nothing happened for a little while. They were just about set to go, and then they heard the door open, and there was this young lady standing at the door. And there were no lights on or anything, but they could see her really clearly. They tried to tell her who they were, and she said, "Well, I know who you are; I've been expecting you to come." And they said, "Well, that's good." And she said, "But you can't come in right now." She says, "But I'd like you to come back and talk to my parents tomorrow, if you could." And the younger companion said, "Okay." And he asked her if she'd take a Book of Mormon, and she said she would. They said good-bye and that they'd be back tomorrow around supper time or just after to talk to her folks and her. And they left. And they were really excited, because they really felt the spirit and that this might come to something. So the next day they went to the house, and the people were home. And a lady answered the door, an older lady answered the door. And she looked kinda confused; she didn't know who they were. And they explained who they were and what [had] happened and that they'd given this young girl a Book of Mormon and that she'd asked them to come back and talk to her parents. And he said that the mother's face got white and she got upset and got angry. And she started telling them, "Well, you shouldn't come to my house saying these things, because there's no young girl that lives here." And they started to describe the girl, and she said, "Well, that sounds like my daughter. And she's been dead for x number of years." She asked them to come in, and they said, "Yeh, that's her picture on top of the piano." And they said, "We gave her a Book of Mormon." And the mother said, "Just a minute," and she went upstairs to the girl's room, and there's a Book of Mormon there sitting on the bed. And he said that because of that they started taking the discussions, and they got baptized a little while later.<sup>2</sup>*

Some of you will recognize this story as a Mormon missionary adaptation of the widely known legend of the vanishing hitchhiker.<sup>3</sup> Interesting though

this fact may be, it is, for our purposes, not particularly important. What is important is that some of the missionaries in the room are encouraged by the story and persuaded that if they remain faithful, keep trying, and do not give up, the Lord might also lead them to success.

In a more cheerful mood now, as a result of hearing this story, the missionaries continue to talk about tracting. They discuss the difficulties they have been having with some of the local Protestant ministers, a discussion that prompts the following story from one of the missionaries:

*Two missionaries called on a Protestant minister. He said, "Gentleman, I have here a glass of poison. If you will drink this poison and remain alive, I will join your church, not only myself but my entire congregation." And he said, "If you won't drink this poison, well, then I'll conclude that you are false ministers of the gospel, because surely your Lord won't let you perish." And so this put the missionaries in kind of a bind, so they went off in a corner and got their heads together, and they thought, "What on earth are we going to do?" So finally, after they decided, they went back over and approached the minister and said, "Tell you what—we've got a plan." They said, "You drink the poison, and we'll raise you from the dead."*

The missionaries all laugh, comforted by this clever, if temporary, victory over an adversary. The conversation then shifts to other kinds of adversaries—dogs and cats—that torment the missionaries and keep them from doing their work. Several of them relate personal encounters they have had with unfriendly animals, and one missionary tells this story:

*He [a missionary] went to this discussion. The lady's cat was always bothering him. This cat just kept coming in and would attack everything on the flannel board [the board missionaries use for demonstrations]. He came up close to him and this elder just kinda reached down and flicked it on the bridge of the nose. Didn't mean to hurt the cat but it killed it. It dropped on the floor and the lady was out of the room at the time, so they curled it around the leg of the chair. And he sat and petted it all through the rest of the discussion. The next time they went, the lady mentioned the cat was dead.*

This story elicits considerable lighthearted banter; but then, as the hour grows late, the stories grow more somber. A discussion of playing around with evil spirits or tempting the devil produces the next story:

*An elder decided that he would test the powers of Satan. So he decided that he would pray to him. He left his companion and went into the closet that was there in their apartment. His companion, after missing him, searched all over and couldn't find him. He noticed that the closet door was open only about an inch, and so he walked over to the closet and tried to open up the closet and couldn't get it open. And he called the mission president, and the mission president came over with his assistants, and together all of them pried at the door. And finally when they got it open, the elder was kneeling in prayer, but he was up off the ground about two feet, suspended in air. And so they immediately administered to him, and he fell on the floor, dead.*

After listening to the story, one missionary comments that had the companions stayed together, as the mission rules say they must, this tragedy might not have occurred. The comment leads to a spirited exchange about terrible things that happen when missionaries break the rules and do not stay together. And this exchange produces still another story:

*A missionary had been on his mission for 23 months and had served a very honorable mission, been an assistant to the mission president and held every leadership position in his mission. He had been successful in baptizing many people into the Church. But one night he and his companion were cooking dinner, and when they got ready to eat they discovered they were out of milk. This one elder told his companion he would be right back; he was going to run to the store on the corner and get some milk. Both of them thought that since the store was only a block away there would be no problem. But on the way, somehow a neighbor woman enticed the elder into her house. He then committed an immoral act with this woman, was excommunicated, and was sent home dishonorably from the mission field.*

As the night passes, one by one the missionaries crawl into their bags and drop off to sleep, but some stay awake until the early morning hours, exchange-

ing and listening to stories. The following morning, they go through another round of meetings with their mission president, and then return to their assigned cities, the storytelling performances they have participated in still fresh in their minds, serving as a hedge against discouragement, a humorous buffer against the bothersome vicissitudes of mission work, and as a warning against stepping too far beyond established patterns of conduct.

In discussing the rhetorical processes operative in narrating in general, folklorist Roger Abrahams gives us a good account, really, of what takes place in this missionary storytelling. Stories like these, says Abrahams, are "artistic enactments," stylized renderings "of the behaviors and recurrent experiences of everyday life"—in this instance, of missionary life. The storytelling replays "anxiety-laden experience while embodying a restatement of cultural norms, teaching and celebrating the group's sense of order at the same time." When someone undergoes an upsetting experience—a missionary is mistreated while tracting, let us say—he is given "a sense of control over the upset," continues Abrahams, "because the scene has already been encountered in performance contexts before."<sup>24</sup>

And he is given this sense of control, I would add, primarily because of the artistic power of the folklore performance—a power which my examples will not convey by themselves but which, I assure you once again, is there. Literary critic Thomas De Quincey addressed this issue over 140 years ago when he spoke of two kinds of literature—"the literature of *knowledge*; and . . . the literature of *power*. The function of the first," said De Quincey, "is to *teach*; the function of the second [which is the function of our folklore performance] is to—*move*: the first is a rudder; the second, an oar or a sail. . . . Tragedy, romance, fairy tale, or epopee," continued De Quincey, "all alike restore to man's mind the ideals of justice, of hope, of truth, of mercy, of retribution, which else . . . would languish for want of sufficient illustration."<sup>25</sup> The folk narrator may not be as self-conscious an artist as a writer of fiction. But he knows that to make his narrative persuasive, he must make it artful—he must imbue it with power. And he knows the rules and

aesthetic standards of his group which he must follow to achieve his ends. Like Sir Philip Sidney's poet, this narrator comes to us "with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue."<sup>6</sup>

From what I have been saying, it should be obvious that I draw no sharp lines of demarcation between folk artistic expressions and artistic expressions in general. Though some of you may consider me a heretic, I have come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as folk literature—there is simply literature, which I would define as the artistic expression of significant human experience. Sometimes that expression is made through the written words of individual authors, sometimes through spoken words in face-to-face encounters among people usually sharing the same social identity. These different modes of transmission and the different audiences to whom they are addressed will, of course, require somewhat different techniques of analysis. But that should not obscure the fact that behind each expression lies the human urge to communicate significant experience and emotion and to influence the surrounding social world through the artistic, and therefore powerful, use of language. And neither of these expressions is any less literature, or art, than the other.

I have looked closely at one small scene—a missionary gathering at a zone conference—and have tried to describe the narrative performance occurring in that scene as well as the behavioral impact of the performances on the participants. In a similar way we could, in the jargon of today, look at other interpretive communities in the Church and discover the force of narrative performances within these communities. Imagine, for example, the force of the following story in the community in which it was narrated in the 1920s:

*We were six in the family when we started—father, my stepmother, two brothers, a sister sixteen years of age and myself. It seems strange that there were more men and boys died than there were women and girls. My two brothers died on the way, and my father died the day after we arrived in Salt Lake. The night my oldest brother died there*

*were nineteen deaths in camp. In the morning we would find their starved and frozen bodies right beside us, not knowing when they died until daylight revealed the ghastly sight. I remember two women that died sitting by me. My mother was cooking some cakes of bread for one of them. When mother gave her one of them she tossed it into the fire and dropped over dead. I remember distinctly when the terrible storm came, and how dismayed the people were. My stepmother took my little brother and myself by the hand and helped us along the best she could while sister and father floundered along with the handcart. How we did struggle through that snow, tumbling over sage brush and crying with cold and hunger.*

*When we camped they had to scrape a place to camp on, and not much wood to make a fire with. The food rations became scarce—there were four ounces daily for an adult and two for a child, and sometimes a little piece of meat. Oh! I'll never forget it, never!*

*When we arrived in Salt Lake we were taken to the assembly room and the people were asked to take as many of us into their homes as they could take care of. My father and mother were taken to one place and my sister and I each to another. I did not see my father again—he died the next day. . . . I did not stand on my feet until the sixth of March. I lost the first joints of six of my toes. My stepmother then carried me twelve blocks to [a] man's home who had been a friend of father's. Mother would carry me as far as she could, then she would put me down in the snow. Then we would cry a while and go on again.<sup>7</sup>*

We could, I repeat, look at still other interpretive communities and narrative performances of still other Mormon experiences. But you have now finished your ice cream, and my time is up. My defense is ended. Again it is not a defense, but rather a plea—a plea to examine closely, learn from, and value those Mormon worlds we construct through language—oral or written—and by which we interpret and conduct our lives.

It has been my pleasure to serve as president of the Association for Mormon Letters this past year and to work closely with those whose good efforts move the Association forward. I appreciate your al-

lowing a renegade folklorist to hold this office and appreciate still more the opportunity to speak in defense today of what binds us all together, no matter what our separate roads—the power of the word.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>William A. Wilson is a Fellow of the American Folklore Society. He has served on the executive committee of the American Folklore Society, as chair of the Folk Arts Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts, as a member of the board of directors of the Utah Arts Council, as editor of *Western Folklore*, and as president of the Folklore Society of Utah. He is the former director of the Utah State University Folklore Program and as immediate past chair of the BYU English Department. He currently directs the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies. This paper was read as the presidential address, in his absence, at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, in January 1989 at Weber State College in Ogden, Utah.

<sup>2</sup>All missionary texts cited in this paper come from the Harris-Wilson Missionary Folklore collection, Folklore Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

<sup>3</sup>See Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1981), 24-40.

<sup>4</sup>Roger D. Abrahams, "Toward an Enactment-Centered Theory of Folklore," in *Frontiers of Folklore*, edited by William R. Bascom, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Selected Symposium [Papers] 5 (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977), 95.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas De Quincy, "The Literature of Knowledge and the Literature of Power," in *Anthology of Romanticism*, selected and edited by Ernest Bernbaum, 3rd ed. rev. and enl. (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1948), 1030-31.

<sup>6</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," in *Renaissance England: Poetry and Prose from the reformation to the Restoration*, edited by Roy Lamson and Hallett Smith (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1956), 285.

<sup>7</sup>In Joel Ricks, Pioneer Narrative Collection, File MS 389, 1924, Special Collections, Merrill Library, Utah State University, Logan.

# AML: Unlikely Skirmisher in the Battle of the Books

Levi S. Peterson<sup>1</sup>

AS RETIRING PRESIDENT I'm happy to report a successful 1989 for the Association for Mormon Letters. The officers and board have met regularly. Four issues of the newsletter were mailed to the membership. Seventy-five persons attended the annual symposium at Weber State College in January 1989, whose sessions featured awards to seven authors, eight scholarly papers and a panel, and readings by authors who received awards. AML sponsored other readings by authors from their own works: three in private homes in Salt Lake, Kaysville, and Provo in March, May, and October; and another in a session of the Sunstone symposium in Salt Lake in August. AML sponsored a conjoint session of scholarly papers at the conference of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in Las Vegas in October. Finally, the officers and board launched a drive to raise an endowment of \$20,000 whose interest will provide generous cash prizes for AML's annual literary awards.

All this is encouraging but not spectacular. During its fourteen-year career, AML has averaged around a hundred members. Compared to its sister organization, the Mormon History Association, which boasts many hundreds of members, a professional newsletter replete with an extensive bibliography, an annual journal, and an annual conference held in such esoteric places as England and Hawaii, the Association for Mormon Letters seems small and timid. I will remind you that AML is a scholarly society recognized as a non-profit organization by the IRS, open to all interested persons who pay its modest dues. Its chief purpose is to encourage authors to write on Mormon themes with artistic competence and to promote the scholarly study of Mormon literature. I ruefully admit that this latter endeavor is

inherently less interesting than the endeavor of the MHA. Those who write about history have a clear advantage over those who write about literature. A person must acquire a taste for literary criticism. Certainly it doesn't come naturally.

It is the state of malnutrition in which AML has always existed that makes me call it an unlikely skirmisher in the battle of the books. AML is a mere platoon of fighters who have volunteered to defend a minor terrain on the American literary landscape recently colonized by a presumptuous upstart called Mormon letters.

The title of my address of course alludes to Jonathan Swift's *The Battle of the Books*, published in 1704. With this mock heroic allegory, Swift entered the debate whether literary superiority lay with classical or with modern authors, a debate which animated the literary capitals of eighteenth century Europe. Though the knightly combat he depicts between such classical authors as Homer, Pindar, Euclid, and Aristotle and such modern authors as Descartes, Bacon, Milton, and Dryden is at last inconclusive, Swift seems to prefer the ancients. The moderns, he finds, arrogantly pretend to discover their subject matter within themselves, like a spider which spins its web entirely from its own entrails, whereas the ancients draw their subject matter from nature, like a bee which gathers nectar from the flowers of the field.

Though Swift's satirical treatise is rarely read today, the battle of the books goes on. It has enlarged, shifted ground, and enlisted new combatants. Those authors whom Swift called moderns have now allied themselves with their former enemies against even more recent moderns. The battle of the books is not a mere figure of speech. In both form and content, books are toxic to one another. The tranquil ambi-

ance of bookstores and libraries is like that of arsenals or ammunition magazines. Books contain conflict and dissension. They are latent battlefields because ideas are so readily inimical to one another. The Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest applies precisely to the literary world. Books strive and contend for esteem among readers. Achieving it, they flourish; failing of it, they fall into oblivion.

Books compete in many arenas. I will here limit my discussion to two prominent and to some degree opposing arenas. One is the marketplace; the other is the forum.

I will first discuss the marketplace. In these United States the marketplace, by which I mean the entire system of finance, production, transportation, advertising, and merchandising, is viewed as little short of sacred. Though the Lord Jesus promised the world to the humble and poor and inveighed against the rich and greedy, his ardent modern disciples frequently propound the godliness of the free enterprise system and the law of supply and demand. Everyone knows that books are a commodity. Like any other product they flourish or die and their creators prosper or starve according to the whim of the consumer. The great majority of the tens of thousands of new books published each year in America are slanted toward clearly defined markets. Authors write and publishers select with an eye toward satisfying the taste of the readers composing those markets. The result is that most books are of that quality variously defined as popular, commercial, or escapist. All the known genres—history, biography, fiction, philosophy, theology, and so on—are abundantly represented in this broad category. Inevitably such books are pitched at the large middle range of human understanding. They are designed to inform and entertain without violating readers' comfortable biases, whatever they may be, and without taxing their grasp of style and structure.

In my judgment, the emergence of a distinct market for Mormon literature is a happy circumstance. Without that distinct market the purveyors for other markets would have continued in the future, as they had in the past, to accept a few works about the Mormons, but they assuredly would not have provided

the remarkable array of novels, histories, biographies, and collections of essays and sermons one sees in bookstores where large numbers of Mormons shop. Simply put, the Mormons have become numerous enough and wealthy enough to create their own market. That market in turn has evoked a considerable publishing industry centered upon, though certainly not limited to, Deseret Book Company and Bookcraft. In the ecology of American literature, the buying power of the Latter-day Saints has created a niche where Mormon writing can survive and even expand.

It is easy for readers who value artistry and philosophic depth in literature to dismiss a multitudinous Mormon literature slanted, like its popular counterparts in other markets, toward a middle range of understanding. For example, Lavina Fielding Anderson and Pamela Gillie Carson make fun of romance and heroic adventure in recent Mormon novels in a couple of delightfully sarcastic essays entitled "Mormon Mushies: The Wonderful World of the Sugar Coated" and "Thrills and Spills in the Mormon Adventure Novel" (*Sunstone Review*, July 1982: 30-32; August 1982: 23-24, 35). As Anderson and Carson point out, popular Mormon literature leaves its readers where it finds them: pleased, comforted, and confirmed. It doesn't challenge, open doors, or impose new ways of viewing life.

Nonetheless, writing for the popular market is not necessarily easy. Commercially oriented literature requires a craftsmanship that a writer is likely to achieve only by a diligent apprenticeship. The market has an implacably simple standard of excellence: only books that sell are good. The large majority of authors who compete in the market fail. For every Blaine Yorgason or Jack Weyland there are three hundred novelists whose manuscripts will never be printed or, if they are, will be quickly remaindered. Clever writers study successful books and try to predict the direction buyers' preferences will turn in the future. Unfortunately, the taste of literary consumers is only roughly predictable. Often when I compare a popular best seller with a similar book that has been remaindered, I am at a loss to explain why one has succeeded enormously and the other not at all. They seem the same to me.

Very obviously, then, books compete lethally against one another in the marketplace. The other arena of competition which I wish to discuss is the forum, my term for that aggregation of authors, publishers, and readers of books deemed worthy of publication for reasons other than profitability. There is among the Mormons, as elsewhere in literary America, a subsidized literature aimed at the rigorous reader. It is in part a scholarly and scientific literature pitched toward modest numbers of specialists and experts. It also includes literature of a belletristic sort: drama, poetry, and fiction of serious artistic intent. This belletristic literature is composed of books which interpret rather than entertain, which offer realism in place of wish fulfillment, and which express themselves in a demanding style and structure. The organizations and presses which publish this literature are supported at least in part by means other than sales and are therefore to some degree exempt from the necessity of making a profit. These include university presses, scholarly and literary organizations, and firms whose owners can rely upon income not related to their publishing ventures.

I call this arena the forum because I relate the open discussion we commonly associate with that word to the process by which books aimed at the rigorous reader are validated. In the forum, the major standard of selection is excellence in form and content. In the forum books must pass muster not only with a selective group of readers, but with referees, reviewers, and critics as well. Admittedly excellence is a nebulous, judgmental concept, yet the attempt to distinguish it is one of the most admirable of human traits. Consider the editorial practice of submitting manuscripts to advisory readers for evaluation. In subsidized publishing these expert readers, often called referees, rank manuscripts against those published works reviewers and critics have judged to be the best of their kind. Their criteria of judgment are many and detailed. If a work is scholarly or scientific, they expect it at least to display a mastery of style and structure conventional to its kind of writing. More important, they expect it to make a notable contribution to knowledge, either through important accessions of new facts or a notable rein-

terpretation of previously recognized facts. If a work is belletristic, referees are likely to expect more than mere mastery of the conventions of style and structure; they will look for innovation and improvement as well. Furthermore, they expect a work to interpret human experience with fresh insight, to confront life's problems squarely, and to challenge settled opinions.

Thus I say the battle of the books includes the products of the subsidized presses. Works intended for the rigorous reader are subject to a competition in some ways more severe than that confronting works intended for the reader seeking escape and entertainment. Disappointed authors abound on all sides. The literary cemeteries of the world are littered with stillborn books. Viewed objectively, writing a book is the riskiest of enterprises. Most authors must measure their effort in years rather than months; and when the effort is finished, the odds are that it will prove unsuccessful. Truly writers wade through the great Slough of Despond. They have many reasons to lose heart, become apathetic, and turn their attention to an endeavor more promising than authorship.

I will return now to AML, which I have called an unlikely skirmisher in the battle of the books. It is unlikely, I have said, because it counts a small membership. Yet it is not negligible. In my opinion, it is crucial to the flourishing of a Mormon literature aimed at the rigorous, rather than the easy, reader. Popular Mormon literature doesn't need AML because the market offers a sufficient motivation; the rewards for those authors fortunate enough to make good prove perennially enticing to a host of others. On the other hand, serious Mormon literature needs every encouragement it can get. Subsidized presses are few, and their funding is precarious. Furthermore, the rewards for publishing with them are never pecuniary; rather, the rewards have to do with recognition and honor. It is in extending recognition and honor that AML performs a crucial service.

I think no one will dispute that AML is on the cutting edge of the endeavor to discern excellence in Mormon literature. No other organization so consistently motivates scholars and critics to study and



write about Mormon literature. By stimulating critical study of Mormon literature AML indirectly encourages authors to write. It encourages them even more directly, I think, by making annual awards to writers and by inviting them to read from their works before appreciative audiences. I speak here from personal experience. I have received several AML awards, and I have been invited to read at AML-sponsored gatherings. I have, in fact, had more than my share of attention from AML and am happy to see the organization honor a wide variety of authors. I will testify that such attention is very gratifying and potent in motivating authors to continue their work.

So I conclude with this exhortation to the members of AML. Be of good cheer and continue in your diligent ways. We have volunteered to hold a small but crucial line in the worldwide battle of the books. If we hold it firmly, the result will be a continued improvement in Mormon literature. Taking our example, reviewers, critics, and readers will respond with greater respect to writing about the Mormons. Encouraged by our sympathy and esteem, authors will write more competently and more profoundly upon Mormon topics. The promise before us is that Mormon literature will become a distinct and honored species of literature at large. That is an end worth battling for.

### Notes

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# To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say

Bruce W. Jorgensen<sup>1</sup>

THE OCCASION TEMPTS ME with definitiveness, the seduction of the summa, the lust of the Last Word. But I mean to speak as a scribe, not as one having authority. There is a huge liberty in that: the freedom to say what I think as generously as I can. I expect also to mingle the philosophies of men with scripture, but I will not teach that mingling for doctrine, and in fact I hope to show how poorly at least one "philosophy of men" mingles. It consoles me to think that, not pretending to teach doctrine, I may freely and without reproach do what we all always do anyhow. I say thanks, too, to all of you for much of what I say here, which I've learned in your good company, especially the company, over the last nearly nine years, of Donna, Althea, Levi, Linda, John, Valerie, and Dennis.

Last semester in a course I teach, a student raised his hand and, acknowledging he might be the only person in the room who felt this way, said he didn't think we ought to read or discuss, in a class at BYU, Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog" because it "glamorized immorality." It's the story of a habitual womanizer who begins a casual affair with a much younger married woman and finds himself seriously in love "for the first time in his life." As often happens, I wasn't ready, but I gave the obvious pedagogical rationale: this is a short story course, Chekhov is a great master of the genre, and this is generally recognized as one of his great (and genre-changing) stories. I offered an analogy of a kind I don't trust very far: is sulfuric acid dangerous? If so, why are BYU students instructed to titrate it in chemistry labs?<sup>2</sup> And I said the question seemed central.

I said that partly because at the same time I'd been rereading and preparing to discuss Socrates' "quarrel with the poets" in Books 2, 3, and 10 of

Plato's *Republic*, which poses the question in an acute and highly general form. Socrates says in essence (and in persistently gender-exclusive language, at least as Rouse translates him) that it's bad for both the poet and the audience to "imitate" a bad man, or a "mixed" man, since what we must do is cultivate virtue, and to imitate badness or mixedness is to make our souls rehearse badness. "The listener," he says, "must be ever careful, must fear unceasingly for the city within himself"; "great is the struggle, great indeed, not what men think it, between good and evil, to be a good man or a bad man."<sup>3</sup> If Socrates means what he says and is right, we're all, all of us TV watchers and novel readers, rather steadily contaminating ourselves with mixedness if not badness.

Yet Plato's dialogues themselves "imitate" both "mixed" characters like Phaedrus and the interlocutors here, Plato's half-brothers Glaucon and Adeimantos, and pretty decidedly "bad" ones like Meno and Alcibiades. So we might suspect some subtle, midwifing form of Socratic (or Platonic) irony at play in the famous quarrel. Socrates may be trying to provoke his interlocutors to question the notion that Homer and Hesiod "educate" by offering models for "imitation"; or to question the more general notion of "imitation" as an adequate account of how fictions work, how they're made, how they're received.

I notice that no matter how generally Socrates poses the question, he also rather insistently returns to specific, even singular instances—Achilles, Priam, Odysseus, Zeus, and so on. Is he inviting Glaucon and Adeimantos to consider such narrative singulars so closely as to "deconstruct" the general "theory" he seems to be giving them? My own experiences with the question, too, are always provoked by literary

singulars, though the would-be censors (in my class or in myself) nearly always appeal to some general or even "universal" principle. I'd venture to state Socrates' supposed position this way: Poetic works educate us by offering us models to "imitate" in our actual political and ethical lives. But to do so they "imitate" the political and ethical badness of mixed or bad persons. Thus while offering to "educate" us they actually infect us with badness. Therefore, from any city that would be a good city, we must ban poetical "imitation."

A close criticism of either the first or second proposition, in the light of our experience of any of the singular instances Socrates alludes to or quotes, might undermine either proposition and thus the whole argument. But I can't settle the famous quarrel here or now—it's one for readers of Greek who know far more about fifth-century Athens, especially its notions of education, than I'm likely ever to learn.

For Mormon readers and writers, versions of the quarrel keep coming up as we write, read, review, and commend or condemn works of putative "Mormon poetry" or "Mormon fiction," etc. A few days after that one came up in my class, another came up in Gene England's Mormon literature class, when I guest-lectured, in the form of troubled reactions to Dennis Clark's story in *Greening Wheat*, "Answer to Prayer" (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984). Was this pun-riddled story about a troubled Mormon husband who masturbates in the john at work, invents fantastic/domestic bedtime tales for his children, and prays with shocking fervor and honesty "really Mormon" fiction? and was it "good" or "harmful" to read it?

Yet another version came up not long ago in Richard Cracroft's *BYU Studies* review of England and Clark's poetry anthology *Harvest* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989)<sup>4</sup> which found many poems in the latter half of the book, apparently, lacking a "whole and absolute" "vision of the universe," and thus failing to express "the innateness and immediacy of the divine." These, wrote the Reviewer (I'll call him "Reviewer" to avoid simplistic identification with our friend Richard Cracroft, who is a much broader man<sup>5</sup>), were poems turned up by an editor "rooting in the humus of recondite and not-very-fertile Structuralism."<sup>6</sup> In these poems the Reviewer found "only occasionally . . . that

distinctively Latter-day Saint voice, the sensibility of the believing poet," but rather more often the spoor of "a faltering spiritual vision" or even the "repress[ion] and replace[ment of] soaring spirituality with earth-bound humanism." These were "decidedly non-LDS poems."

It was at best a mixed relief, amid all this, to find a couple of my own poems let into the fold. But distressing, overall, to read so much xenophobia, so much of "Surely thou also art one of *them*; for thy speech bewrayeth thee" (Matt. 26.73; italics mine);<sup>7</sup> to read that so many poems by so many younger Mormon writers are fungoid—truffles or perhaps deadly amanita.<sup>8</sup> I pondered in my weary heart whether I lived—or wanted to live—in a "whole and absolute" universe; and if I did, how any "divine" might manage to be "innate" or "immediate" in it. I wondered aloud a tired, head-in-hands question: Is there a Mormon criticism?

But it's risky to quarrel with the king that shall be.<sup>9</sup> I'd rather take on Socrates first after all, and then try to sneak up on this Reviewer later with the help of some Jewish radicals.<sup>10</sup> Socrates first disposes of the "matter" of poetry—the kinds of stories about gods, heroes, and men that should and should not be told in educating the "guardians" in a well-ordered city; stories like the one Hesiod tells about Kronos castrating his cruel father Ouranos (175), or the one Homer tells about kingly old Priam "rolling on the dunghheap / and calling loudly on the name of each" of his dead sons (185).<sup>11</sup> Then Socrates says to Adeimantos, "We must make up our minds whether we will let the poets imitate when they make their narratives, or imitate in parts and narrate in parts . . . or whether we will allow no imitation at all." It's one of the few places in the dialogue (in the Rouse translation, anyhow) where Adeimantos pulls up sharp: "O my prophetic soul!" he said. "Your question is whether we shall admit tragedy and comedy into our city, or not." And Socrates allows, "Perhaps . . . and perhaps I mean something more than that." He says he doesn't know yet himself, but "wherever the enquiry shall blow us like a breeze, there we must go" (192).

By "imitation," Socrates means that kind of composition in which the poet takes on the "voice" or "manner" of his character (191), that is, using direct dialogue or first-person narration—or, in modern fiction, interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness.

The enquiry eventually blows us toward implications like these—call them reefs or shoals or safe harbor, according to your own literary-ethical disposition:

*"If [the young guardians-to-be] do imitate, they should imitate from childhood . . . men who are brave and temperate, pious, free, all things of that sort; but things not for the free they should neither do nor be clever at imitating, and nothing else that is ugly, that the imitation may never give them a taste of the real thing. Have you perceived that imitations settle into habits, and become nature if they are continued from early youth, in body and voice and mind?" . . .*

*"Then any we care for, and think they should become good men, we will not allow to imitate a woman, being men themselves, either a young or older woman, nagging at a husband or quarrelling with gods and boasting, thinking herself happy; or one held in misfortune with mourning and dirge, much less one in sickness or in love or in labour of child." . . .*

*"Nor must they imitate slaves whether men or women, doing what slaves do. . . ."*

*"Nor wicked men, as it seems, cowards, those who [are] . . . scolding, mocking and speaking vilely of each other, whether drunk or sober, and imitating what such men say and do to each other or to themselves with offence. And I think they must not get the habit of making themselves like madmen in word or act. They must know about madmen, of course, and about bad men and women, but they must do nothing of all this nor imitate this."*

*" . . . the decent man in his narrative . . . will not be ashamed . . . especially to imitate the good man acting firmly and sensibly, but less willingly and less often a good man shaken by disease or passions, or again by drunkenness or some other misfortune. But when he comes to one unworthy of himself, he will not wish to make himself really like a worse man, except now and then if the man does something good; he will be ashamed. He is unpractised, you see, in imitating such persons; and at the same time he resents modelling and fitting himself into the shapes of the worse. He disdains it in mind, unless it be just a bit of fun." (193-94)*

Socrates does urge Adeimantos—baiting him to resist the argument?—to admit that "the mixed style

[combining "simple narrative" in the poet's own voice with "imitation" of the characters' voices] is delightful; and much the most delightful to children and tutors alike." But it's not long before we blow a goodbye kiss to the imitative poet and let him "go in peace to another city" (195-96).

In the last book of the dialogue, Socrates looks back<sup>12</sup> on the "city . . . in words" he and his interlocutors have "arranged . . . most admirably in general," and says he finds it "especially" so in regard to poetry, by their having decided "not to let in the imitative part of it" because "all such things are the ruin of the hearers' minds, unless they possess the antidote, knowledge of what . . . things really are" (393-94). Notice the implied "poison" or "contamination" metaphor, to which I shall return.<sup>13</sup> Here, Socrates must review and expand his critique of "imitation," as Glaucon and Adeimantos seem to have forgotten it. Are they dunderheads? Is this another cue that *we* ought to resist Socrates' argument because *they don't*?<sup>14</sup>

Imitation works "at three removes from truth" by imitating only appearances of things, which are themselves imitations of the Forms. "Then the imitator will neither know nor have right opinion about what he imitates, as regards fineness or badness"; and "his imitation is a kind of play, not earnest." Worse still, it "joins hands and makes bosom friends with that part in us which is far away from wisdom, for no healthy and true end," and is thus "an inferior uniting with an inferior and breeding inferior offspring"—terribly un-eugenic. That is, since all imitation is of "men in action" and "feeling either grief or joy" in their action and its results, and since

*the wise and calm character, being nearly always the same and self-composed, is not easy to imitate, and when imitated is not readily understood, especially by a festival assembly of all sorts and conditions of men gathered in a theatre; for the condition of mind is . . . alien to them;*

then,

*the imitative poet is clearly not naturally suited to imitate this part of the soul, and his skill is not set upon adapting itself to it, if he is to be popular with the multitude, but rather to imitate the resentful*

*and complex character, because that can be imitated well.*

Doing what he does best—this poor business of imitating inferior appearances for the inferior part of the soul—the imitative poet,

*arouses and fosters and strengthens this [inferior, divisive] part of the soul, and destroys the rational part; he establishes an evil constitution in his soul; he gratifies the unthinking part of it . . . by imagining images very far away indeed from the truth.*

The imitative poet does himself ill; he is self-corruptive (399, 402-3, 405-6).

And that, says Socrates, is not "yet the strongest accusation against imitation. For it is surely monstrous that it is able to corrupt even the decent people, with very few exceptions," by enticing<sup>15</sup> them to "yield" themselves, with "delight" and "sympathy" no less, to "womanly" states of soul in imagined characters of which they would be ashamed in themselves. This is true, Socrates maintains, of "pity," of jesting at "the ridiculous,"

*"And the same with love-making and anger and all the desires and griefs and pleasures in the soul which we say go along with our every action—poetical imitation produces all such things in us. For it nourishes them by watering what it ought to dry up, and makes them rulers in us, when they ought to be ruled that we may become better and happier instead of worse and more miserable." (406-7)*

Glaucon "cannot deny it"; and so, farewell Homer and all the comic and tragic poets, including the aged and still astonishingly brilliant Sophocles, of whom the equally aged Cephalos reported this at the beginning of the dialogue: "I was with him once when somebody asked him, 'What about love now, Sophocles? Are you still able to serve a woman?' 'Hush, man,' he said, 'I've escaped from all that, thank goodness. I feel as if I had escaped from a mad, cruel slave driver'" (127).<sup>16</sup>

Farewell to poesy, then, unless she "can give some reason why she ought to be in a well-ordered city," for though we must admit we are "enchanted" by her, "especially when [we] see her through Homer,"

we must "do as people who once were in love with somebody, if they believe their love to be no good to them: they don't want to give it up, but they must" (408). So the intellectual male "founders" of a (mental and verbal) city reject the works and the presence of imitative imagination, personified as female.<sup>17</sup>

Was that what my student wanted, what those students of Gene England wanted, what the Reviewer of *Harvest* wanted? that well-ordered city, uncontaminated by the "alien" poison of the "imitation" of "bad" or even "mixed" men and women? that well-guarded citadel of the (male, mailed) mind,<sup>18</sup> that castle in the air, that cloud-cuckoo land?<sup>19</sup> Poor Chekhov will condemn himself to exile from that city of words by the words of his own hand, in a letter written on April Fool's Day 1890 to his millionaire conservative editor-friend Alexei Suvorin, who had scolded him for his "objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil":

*You would have me say, when depicting horse-thieves, that stealing horses is an evil. . . . Stealing horses is not simply stealing but a passion. Of course, it would be gratifying to couple art with sermonizing, but, personally, I find this exceedingly difficult and, because of conditions imposed by technique, all but impossible. Why, in order to depict horse thieves in seven hundred lines I must constantly speak and think as they do and feel in keeping with their spirit.<sup>20</sup>*

As an artist—indeed the great poet of that form we call the short story—Chekhov, grandson of a serf and son of a father who beat him; Chekhov, who later said he had "squeeze[d] the slave out of himself, drop by drop," consciously chooses to do just what Socrates warns against, to "speak and think . . . in keeping with [the] spirit" of men and women shaken by passions, sometimes of women "in sickness or in love or in labour of child"; he consciously embraces the risk of what Socrates felt was a form of slavery, and in that embrace he finds one form of the liberty he prizes most highly: "to be a free artist and nothing more," free "from force and falsehood, no matter how [they] manifest themselves."<sup>21</sup> And I am saying I think that in so doing he is true—as a great many other

modern and contemporary writers are true—in a very deep way to the central passion of Judaeo-Christian story: the passion of the Other. I'll try to explain.

I'll take a flying leap,<sup>22</sup> is what I'll do, and say that I think the central question of all story—and thus possibly of every form of human culture—is just this: How shall we greet the Other? Shall we devour, or annihilate, or welcome? Polyphemos the wheel-eyed or single-eyed<sup>23</sup> has his answer: eatemup!<sup>24</sup> And for those who like their answers short and scriptural, I'll offer two or three before going on somewhat longer. From the Apostle Paul, once Saul of Tarsus, once "consenting unto [the] death" of Stephen, once making "havock of the church," once a persecutor "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,"<sup>25</sup> once stopped and questioned by a Stranger on the Road: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Acts 8:1, 3; Acts 9:1; Heb. 13:2). (I'm making the traditional assumption that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews: God forbid the writer should be somebody else, some stranger, some unknown other!) Paul may have in mind the way Abraham rushes out of his tent to welcome strangers in the plains of Mamre (Gen. 18:1-2), or even the way his brother Lot welcomes two strangers (the same? others?) at the gate of Sodom the polluted city (Gen. 19:1-3). But I digress. Here's another one, which the author of Hebrews may have had by heart: "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:34).<sup>26</sup> The scriptorially minded could also read Deuteronomy 10:16-19 before commending themselves as suppliants to the Lord's care tonight:

*Circumcise therefore the foreskin<sup>27</sup> of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.*

*For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great god, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward:*

*He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and the widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.*

*Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

I mean to take the ancient and widely understood habit of hospitality as metaphor and ground for Christian (and Mormon) imagination and criticism. On the way, and to substantiate "widely understood," I remind you of how that habit operates in the Odyssey (by Homer or somebody else or maybe even, Zeus forbid,<sup>28</sup> a woman). When Telemakhos, seeking news of his absent father, reaches Pylos, the city of Nestor, breaker of horses, a sacrifice to Poseidon is in progress; but the stranger is welcomed and feasted on wine and the flesh of the sacrificial bulls before Nestor speaks:

*Now is a better time to interrogate our guests and ask them who they are, now they have had the pleasure of eating. Strangers, who are you? From where do you come sailing? (3.69-71)*

I remind you that in Greek one word, *xenos*, means both "stranger" and "guest"; and in the world Homer (or whoever) imagined, the stranger/guest is always—if the means are available—washed, sometimes fully bathed and clothed in clean garments, and fed to repletion—all this before being asked his name and story. Sometimes the story is asked before the name, I suspect because the story will tell us, better than a name could, who the stranger is among us. Much the same thing happens to Telemakhos when he reaches Lakedaimon and stands in the forecourt of the house of Menelaos, who is "deeply vexed" that his "henchman" should wonder whether to unharness the strangers' horses "or send them on to somebody else": "Unharness," the king says, "and bring the men here to be feasted" (4.1-36). The searching son isn't even asked his name in this case; Helen guesses who he is by his resemblance to "great-hearted Odysseus," and Peisistratos, son of Nestor, confirms the guess (4.140-57).

And the lost father Odysseus himself, when he makes his way, already bathed and wearing garments laundered at the inlet by Nausikaa, into the hall of the Phaiakian king and queen on the island of Scheria, spends a night and most of the next day, first given the seat of the king's best-loved son (7.170-71), then

it: first, yes, the woman's desire, her pleasure, her fear and shame and guilt, her agony at being hauled into open daylight (half-naked? the text doesn't say, thus allowing our moral and sensual imagination to take part also, with results differing according to gender); but the men too, their conniving, their so-conscious righteousness, their prurience, their pleasure in cruelty, maybe mixed with shame and pity, whatever passions shake them. I must suppose that, being who and what he is, this constantly tested stranger dives to the bottom of whatever they all feel, each one, descending "below all things" (D&C 88:6; cf. 122:8) to become enough to answer their need more than their bad-faith legalistic question.

The imagination of Jesus, I'm suggesting, which is the originary Christian and Mormon imagination, will take precisely the risk Socrates warns against as the ruin of the soul:<sup>40</sup> to understand an other, whoever the other is, however bad or mixed. Something like this, I am persuaded, must lie behind the response Jesus makes, which most of us, sinners and accusers in need of justice and mercy, have by heart and can quote verbatim. I'm saying that Christian imagination chooses to be the antithesis of Socratic imagination: where the Greek will ascend, will fly every possible contamination in order to keep the city of pure soul well-governed and sterile, the radical Jew dives to the bottom to seize the root<sup>41</sup> of our cruelty and sorrow, to search out the venom that festers our wounds and thus begins to heal us. To do that, Christian imagination risks hearing our voices, the voices of all the others; "alternate voices" if you like,<sup>42</sup> voices speaking by turns. (To hear or to echo or quote may not be to "imitate" in Socrates' sense; I have no answer to that question.) The risk of listening to other voices brings me, then, to what I propose—have been proposing all along—as the first gesture of a "Mormon reading," a "Mormon" way of judging the works of the imagination. Here I can rely on two quite explicit statements in Mormon scripture. This was the partial answer I took back to my class a week or so later, with the question of Chekhov's story still hanging over us. First the voice of the sojourner known as Jesus: "And whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do good is of me; for good cometh of none save it be of

me. I am the same that leadeth men to all good" (Eth. 4.12). Then the voice of Mormon, chronicler of a culture wrecked by fraternal estrangement, his words handed on to us by his son Moroni, a visitor who showed up shining in a boy's bedroom: "I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God" (Moro. 7.16).

I'd want to underscore certain words here: "gift" of course; and "inviteth," whose Latin affiliations and affinities are obscure, but which we normally associate with welcome; and "persuade," which at its root touches sweetness and is closely allied with *suavio*, to kiss.<sup>43</sup> But my immediate question is how to apply such a rule of judgment to literature, or rather, to specific stories. Clearly, these voices urge all of us who meet a stranger or a story to consider what it "invites" or "persuades" us to do. It's the burden of every censor: if I would censor, I first must say what "it" invites me to do. My student challenging Chekhov may not have considered this aspect of the question. At least he did not say he felt invited to do evil or persuaded not to believe in Christ. Ostensibly, he seemed to want to persuade me and the rest of the class to be better Christians.

But I'm already ahead of myself. First of all, what "thing" are we talking about? The story? Or any one experience of it? I suspect it's the latter, since not all of us are persuaded alike by the same story, and each of us may find different persuasions or invitations in the same story upon different readings. Probably, too, it is wrong, or at least rash, for us to take a part of the thing—the subject of the story, or a scene or detail or word in it—for the "thing." And so also with a moment of our experience of a thing, whether it's a scriptural narrative or anything else.

Concerning whether it's "right" or "wrong" to read a story like "The Lady with the Dog" in a BYU class, then, how would we judge? Does it "persuade" or "invite" to do good or to do evil? I can only say what it persuades or invites me to do (and perhaps I am deceived, and in some dark pocket of my psyche something else is afoot).<sup>44</sup> To put this too simply and

generally, Chekhov's story invites me to believe that love is better than sexual predation and to understand something of the hearts and minds of two casual adulterers (the "he and she" of it) who painfully and problematically (and however imperfectly) come to love one another and face at last the question of what now to do. Is it always "wrong" to divorce? Has marriage always and everywhere persuaded or invited to do good? (A friend told me he once heard a man say, "I never could understand how anyone could commit adultery until I got married.") Reading literature is risky, as living in Western culture, in America, in Provo, at BYU in the 1990s is risky. So we read and discuss literature in class, which is also risky, but which may help us to be more critical—and more merciful—"readers" of the culture we live in. Chekhov, I find so far, helps me that way.

Something like that was my belated partial answer to a hard question that still has not gone away; I trust rather that it has begun to be listened to, has become part of the conversation in the household. I want to turn now at last back to questions of "Mormon literature," questions the AML has long assembled to ask and converse about. Implicitly, perhaps, to questions like "Is there a Mormon criticism?" or the one Dennis Clark asked in *Harvest* (289), which I hope you now hear as highly pertinent: "Is there a Mormon audience for poetry?" Explicitly, to questions about fiction, about short stories and novels. And for responses, I want to listen awhile to the voices of some others: novelists and story-writers like Chekhov, Henry James, Rainer Maria Rilke, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Reynolds Price, and Milan Kundera.

About being a Mormon audience, about Mormon reading, including the formal, institutional kinds of reading we call literature classes and criticism, then, I answer first that it would be generous, hospitable;<sup>45</sup> it would listen, then take its turn and converse, as the AML for fifteen years now has feasted and conversed. Yet we've also had a continuing "tradition" of sometimes adverse or even acerbic dissent from the decisions of our preferably anonymous awards judges: this or that novel or batch of poems or stories is "not really Mormon"; and ironically enough, one such

plaintiff had been the defendant in an earlier complaint. But we're not a court, not even a "court of love." We're more of a wayside inn, and these complaining and dissenting voices, too, should be entertained in our conversation. *Diversa non adversa*, Peter Abelard wrote to his stern opponent Bernard of Clairvaux: we—our minds, our voices—differ but are not against one another.<sup>46</sup>

Maybe the idea of "criticism" itself, of a crisis in which we have to decide, is the problem; we are to "receive"<sup>47</sup> and "hear" before we judge. Hospitable reading would be slow to shut out. It would be slow to decide whether a literary visitor is "Mormon" or not, especially slow to gauge this by some presumed "doctrinal" criterion or some elusive metaphysical or "essential" notion of "spirituality." After all, we are instructed by the visiting resurrected Christ in 3 Nephi 11:28-40 that his "doctrine" is repentance, faith, and baptism,

*and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them. And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock. (39-40)*<sup>48</sup>

If that and only that is "doctrine," then it offers a test no poem or story can either pass or fail, since only personal agents can offer to meet such a test, and they do so in action. Maybe Mormonism itself has no "essence" but only a story,<sup>49</sup> which comprises all the stories of all the agents who come upon those invitations to action and offer to take them up.

I suspect it's a striving after wind<sup>50</sup> to pursue the "essence" of Mormon literature. When the Reviewer of *Harvest* says that "the more pertinent question" is "What is a Mormon poem?" he's asking emphatically a question framed by Western ontology, which has always asked "What is it?"—always sought essences uncontaminated by time, space, matter, or the stories of existents. Stories always tell how it goes.<sup>51</sup> "Essentialism" is the problem in that review,<sup>52</sup> and it's why the Reviewer's judgments and descriptions of the poems he shuts out don't attend closely enough to the poems to notice traits that might "pass" even his



criteria. Margaret Rampton Munk's suite of poems on dying (as a Mormon) with cancer "are certainly not a Mormon response to life and death," he says, apparently overlooking, for instance, the likely Mormon overtones of "solemn ceremony" and "sisterhood" in poem 4, "The Nurses," or what I take for a pervading "Mormon" attitude toward the body.<sup>53</sup>

Next, of Kathy Evans he writes, "Neither is [her] beautiful revery, 'Midnight Reassembled,' rooted in the Mormon ethos in any way that I can discern," and offers in evidence these lines from the middle of the poem:

*Somewhere, out there  
in the immensity of night  
a swan glides across  
the surface of its own image,  
wings touching wings on the water.  
We touch the world this way.*<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps he glimpsed "the self-fascination of much contemporary poetry" in the mirror-image here, and that made him miss the pun in "a swan glides across" and forget that in the immense night Cygnus is the Northern Cross and that the swan has served as one of the many figures of Christ from at least the twelfth century *Speckled Book* down to the contemporary Galway Kinnell's "To Christ Our Lord."<sup>55</sup> Yet it should have been harder not to hear in these lines the echo of "the Spirit of God mov[ing] [or brooding] upon the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2).

I notice, too, that all but one of the specifically named shut out poems are by women, while all but two of the specifically shut in are by men;<sup>56</sup> both of those are Linda Sillitoe's, and one, to be sure, is her "Song of Creation," which the Reviewer calls "lovely, feminist lines about the Mother and Father sharing in the creation of the world."<sup>57</sup> Have I stepped in still-fresh irony here?<sup>58</sup> Mother and Father make a world together, but their daughters' voices sound a little too strange to this guardian of the city.

The one poem by a male writer specifically shut out of the fold is Lance Larsen's "Passing the Sacrament at Eastgate Nursing Home," which the Reviewer describes as "a portrayal of routine and sterile Aaronic priesthood service in which the sacred ritual never

rises beyond the 'bikini splendor, of the Hunsaker twins' or 'the lady in 243 who wore her breasts at her waist.'"<sup>59</sup> Deflected here, perhaps, by the attention the youthful persona does pay to female flesh, young and old, the Reviewer's censorious El Marko felt-tip must have spread its swath too wide and blotted out the boy's clear awareness that "we gave them / bread of another world." Those Hunsaker twins may now be "sex objects," as is "the wrinkled / Miss July behind the door" of the janitor's closet where they prepare the sacrament; but this boy is coming to know they will one day be women like the fallen lady in 243. He can add two plus two, even if the Reviewer can't. At the end of the poem he's thinking not of the twins' "bikini splendor" but of that lady and of how he "with clean and careful hands / laid the bread on her tongue." This is one of the tongues we must learn to hear, as this boy may now begin to try. The one female tongue that speaks in the poem calls him "Jesus"—this priesthood holder headed for the Order of the Son of God. And his priestly service is not "sterile"; his hands are "clean and careful." Would those be enough "hint[s] of transcendence and green-ing spirituality"? By my own argument I should not trouble to seek them out. I don't offer my readings as "definitive" (I don't believe in definitive readings, though I do believe in worse and better, smaller and larger), or as deciding whether these poems are "Mormon" or not; but I would say my readings seem to receive and respond more fully to the poems' available language. And above all I want to suggest what perils we are cast among<sup>60</sup> when we play the metaphysical quiz-game of essences.

Mormon reading would be patient, longsuffering, kind; its truest guides might be 1 Corinthians 13 and the Thirteenth Article of Faith.<sup>61</sup> "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1). I suggest that this saying of Paul says if I don't graciously welcome and hear the tongues of others, I "thing" my own tongue, I become a noisemaker, a nonperson, incapable of true saying. Wouldn't a Mormon criticism conduct itself "ethically" in some manner rather close to what our friend and neighbor Wayne Booth recommends and

exemplifies in *The Company We Keep*.<sup>62</sup> Might it not ask what "kind of friendship" an implied author offers us in the gift of a text? what "kind of desirer" the text invites us to be? whether it beckons us into a "pattern of life . . . that friends might well pursue together"?

A Mormon criticism will surely not judge very quickly by superficial elements such as the presence of the always-ready-to-hand clichés of pop Mormon "spirituality" or "virtue," or, negatively, by the presence of topics we disapprove or words we must not say, in honor of which I've begun to compose a ditty:

*We must not say the a-word,  
no, never say the b,  
not any of the three—  
or is it four or five or more,  
or upwards of a score?  
At any rate, not even contemplate  
the words that start with c;  
and d avoid lest ding or dong  
accompany our little song.  
And e-words—they excite,  
though polysyllabically long,  
so saying them cannot be right;  
and then we find and founder on  
the letter coming all along . . .*

Well, it might go on, and I've had flashes of the whole alphabet becoming interdicted, right down to Z, for—of course! Thank you, Pat Aikins—zucchini, which one dictionary defines as "a summer squash of bushy growth with smooth, slender, cylindrical, dark-green fruit."<sup>63</sup>

Mormon reading, I dare to hope, would be slow to shut out a poem or story merely because it takes up the matter of sex—"the great relation between men and women, the constant world-renewal," as Henry James called it, noting its "immense omission in our fiction" in his 1899 essay "The Future of the Novel."<sup>64</sup> That may have been only part of what Chekhov had in mind when he advised his aspiring-writer brother Alexander, "Don't have too many characters. The center of gravity should be two: he and she."<sup>65</sup> I can take Chekhov generally here, supposing "he and she"—or "him and her" as other translations have it—epito-

mize the play of difference, of necessary complementary opposites, Same and Other, which might beget all stories. Still, there are "The Lady with the Dog" and a great many others in which Chekhov tries out the "him and her" or "he and she" of it—the how and show of it, the who and shoe of it, the hem and sheer of it, the hire and share, the hope and shape of it, the here and home, the harm and charm, the hump and slump, the chime and shine, the heat and shade, the hide and hair, the high and shy of it, the hum and whirr and the hymn and howl of it. (That was just a little riff for Dennis; and for Levi and Althea and Linda and John and Donna and Valerie if they don't mind.)

E. M. Forster said that "Human beings have their great chance in the novel."<sup>66</sup> And D. H. Lawrence wrote that the novel was "the highest form of human expression so far attained. . . . Because it is so incapable of the absolute."<sup>67</sup> Flannery O'Connor, that fiercely orthodox Catholic, wrote:

*Fiction is the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts. It is closest to man in his sin and his suffering and his hope, and it is often rejected by Catholics [Mormons too, as we know] for the very reasons that make it what it is. It escapes any orthodoxy we might set up for it, because its dignity is an imitation of our own, based like our own on free will, a free will that operates even in the teeth of divine displeasure.<sup>68</sup>*

I think they all had in mind the same conception of the novel that Milan Kundera has in mind when he says, "The novel is the imaginary paradise of individuals. It is the territory where no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin."<sup>69</sup> The world of a novel is not that of some absolute, "essentialist" either/or, these voices say, but a world of both/and, all together. Novels are polyglot and heteroglot: many-tongued, other-tongued.

For Kundera, the European novel thus understood is "the depreciated legacy of Cervantes."<sup>70</sup> But I think he hasn't traced its genealogy back far enough. I think the fiction that is "incapable of the absolute" and in which "everyone has the right to be understood" descends lineally from Mark and Luke, from the stories they tell about that wayfaring stranger Jesus

and his doings on dusty roads and streets; and behind them, I think, it goes back to some of the stories the stranger himself told. The stories I've already retold may suggest where I'd start looking; but to see this genealogical line start to trace itself, read Luke 15 and notice there how different Jesus' last parable, the one we call the Prodigal Son, is from his first two; how it gives everyone, even the grudging Pharisees, their chance to be heard and understood, and then doesn't shut the story down with the "absolute" of a "doctrinal" message. Then notice how the good-news writer Luke doesn't shut his story down either, doesn't tell us how this particular bunch of Pharisees took that tale.<sup>71</sup> I suspect that a lot more fiction-writers than are dreamt of in our theory or history have learned from these storytellers. We shame ourselves by not taking instruction from them too. Kundera comes closer to this genealogy when he calls the novel "the art inspired by God's laughter."<sup>72</sup>

D. H. Lawrence seems to have had such open, generous storytelling partly in mind when he wrote that "only in the novel are all things given full play; or at least, they may be given full play . . ." For him, "out of the full play of all things emerges the only thing that is anything, the wholeness of a man, the wholeness of a woman, man alive, and live woman."<sup>73</sup> More and more, I find, I want that wholeness in the fiction I read—and, because I've tasted it richly there, in the life I live. For D. H. Lawrence, in a letter written 2 June 1914 (thirty years before my own birth):

*the only re-sourcing of art, re-vivifying it, is to make it more the joint work of man and woman. I think the one thing to do, is for men to have the courage to draw nearer to women, expose themselves to them, and be altered by them: and for women to accept and admit men. That is the start—by bringing themselves together, men and women—revealing themselves each to the other, gaining great blind knowledge and suffering and joy.<sup>74</sup>*

In the next breath, Lawrence refers to this as "a sermon on a stool."<sup>75</sup>

Like Henry James, Rainer Maria Rilke writes of "the great renewal of the world," in the fourth of his *Letters to a Young Poet*; and rather like Lawrence he suggests that it,

*will perhaps consist in one phenomenon: that man and woman, freed from all mistaken feelings and aversions, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbors, and will unite as human beings, in order to bear in common, simply, earnestly, and patiently, the heavy sex that has been laid upon them.<sup>76</sup>*

And in his *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, in a section that recalls the seventh of the *Letters to a Young Poet*, his narrator writes:

*But now that so much is changing, isn't it time for us to change? Couldn't we try to gradually develop and slowly take upon ourselves, little by little, our part in the great task of love? We have been spared all its trouble, . . . We have been spoiled by superficial pleasures like all dilettantes, and are looked upon as masters. But what if we despised our successes? What if we started from the very outset to learn the task of love, which has always been done for us? What if we went ahead and became beginners, now that much is changing?<sup>77</sup>*

More and more I'm persuaded that to undertake the great task of love—all of its works—I must listen to the voice of the Other, let the stranger say. I'm urged this way by some of the voices, female and male, that I've listened to longest and most attentively.

Eudora Welty wrote, "Imagining yourself inside the skin, body, heart, and mind of any other person is the primary feat, but also the absolute necessity":<sup>78</sup> the absolute necessity for making fiction. Reynolds Price's richest early story, "A Chain of Love," in which he imagined himself into a country girl named Rosacoke Mustian, was helped by his reading of Welty's fiction in the year he wrote that story. Recently, Price has urged more specifically:

*Men should excavate and explore, however painfully, their memories of early intimacy with women, and attempt again to produce novels as whole as those of their mammoth and healing predecessors [such as Tolstoy]. More women should step through a door that is now wide ajar—a backward step, also painful but short, into the room of their oldest knowledge: total human sympathy.<sup>79</sup>*

I welcome both these voices, and I pass their word

on to my students. I'm urged on and encouraged by the examples of several among us: Douglas Thayer and Levi Peterson, who in recent (and, for Thayer, yet-unpublished) essays have begun to write movingly about their mothers; Bert Wilson, who listened so well to his mother's stories that one of her sentences helped guide him "through the dark."<sup>80</sup> My own first step out of my hard male skull and into a voice and experience much like my mother's, in an unpublished story called "Two Years Sunday,"<sup>81</sup> still seems one of the genuinely liberating things I've done in my slow effort to learn to write stories; other equally nourishing steps farther into that "common room" have followed, and I mean to take more.

But the step I take here and now is "down" or "aside"—from inconspicuous figurehead to something near a voice whispering low out of the dust. My valediction as outgoing president is simply this: Welcome to our common room. Tell us your story so our hearing and telling can go on. That would be faring well.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Bruce Jorgensen holds the M.A. and Ph.D. from Cornell and, since 1975, has taught literature and writing at BYU, where he is currently section head of Creative Writing. He has published review, criticism, poetry, and fiction in *Carolina Quarterly*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Western American Literature*, *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, the *Ensign*, and *Wasatch Review*. This presidential address was delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 26 January 1991 at Westminster College in Salt Lake City. "Ancillary and Humble Annotations" that provide a running commentary on the Speaker's remarks in the footnotes are by N. Oman Claythorpe. It also appears in *Sunstone*, 16, no. 4 (October 1992): 25-35, followed by Richard Cracroft's 1992 presidential lecture, pp. 36-42.

<sup>2</sup>Are they? We suspect the Speaker hasn't troubled to check this allegation. —NOC

<sup>3</sup>*Great Dialogues of Plato*, translated by W. H. D. Rouse (1956; reprint. ed., New York: NAL, 1984), 408.

<sup>4</sup>Richard H. Cracroft, Review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, edited by Eugene England and Dennis Clark, *BYU Studies* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1990): quotations from pp. 120-22.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed! And his literary-appreciative girth is shown by his high praise of that renegade Vardis Fisher's rendition of Joseph Smith's first vision (*Children of God* [New York: Harper, 1939]) and by his recent adoption (note the word) of that West Coast expatriate Judith Freeman's novel *The Chinchilla Farm*

(New York: Norton, 1989) for his Mormon literature class at BYU, Winter 1991. —NOC

<sup>6</sup>Cry foul! Here the Speaker, unable to resist his own penchant for puns and quasi-scatological jokes, wrenches the Reviewer's remark *radically* out of context: the phrase applies to editor Clark's theory, not his selections; and "rooting" is obviously used neither in its porcine nor its mycological, but in its *dendrological* sense. —NOC

<sup>7</sup>Obviously the Speaker's emphasis. And isn't he playing fast-and-loose with the sacred text here? This is what the bystanders in the high priest's courtyard say to Peter, the President-elect of the Church, who is denying he knows Jesus in order to shelter the seedling Church. The Speaker so wildly misapplies this scripture here that we wonder if he is truly Mormon. —NOC

<sup>8</sup>Once again the Speaker is seduced by his own devious wit: he might not know an amanita if it bit him, though he seems to know that its common name is "death cup," thus offering an odd allusive link to the execution of Socrates. The Reviewer neither said nor implied anything of the sort! —NOC

<sup>9</sup>Really too pedantic! *Rex quondam Rexque futurus* indeed! But does the Speaker expect us to believe he has read Malory or Geoffrey of Monmouth, much less that he really knows any Latin? —NOC

<sup>10</sup>Surely here he tips his incarnadine hand. —NOC

<sup>11</sup>These unedifying stories may be in the classical texts, but must the Speaker rub our noses in them? What's his insidious game? We suspect he might be one of those "true believers" in "history with warts," too. —NOC

<sup>12</sup>A dark, perverse hint here of Lot's wife looking back on Sodom (Gen. 19.26)? Or a suggestion that the Speaker suspects Socrates himself would not be a citizen of the city he has created? Unthinkable. —NOC

<sup>13</sup>Here the Speaker seems to fancy himself a hero in the mold of General MacArthur—a man worthy of imitation (but not by such as this). —NOC

<sup>14</sup>Rhetorical question. Does he really suppose Socrates and Plato don't mean what they say? That they did not always strive to speak and write in such a way as not only to be understood but also never to be *misunderstood*? —NOC

<sup>15</sup>The word does not occur in Plato's text, and we suspect an allusion to its scriptural occurrences in 2 Nephi 2:16: "Man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other"; or Mosiah 3:19: "the natural man is an enemy to God . . . unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit." —NOC

<sup>16</sup>Why must the Speaker—why indeed must Plato—leave in this unedifying bit of trivia? We might excuse a pagan—but this Speaker! —NOC

<sup>17</sup>Here, dare we suspect a "feminist" agenda? —NOC

<sup>18</sup>O my prophetic soul, indeed. —NOC

<sup>19</sup>Sheer name-calling! —NOC

<sup>20</sup>*Letters*, edited by Avraham Yarmolinsky (New York: Viking, 1973), 133. The tone of this smacks of the unseemly petulance of the recipient of literary patronage. Moscow ru-

mor about this time had it that "Chekhov is Suvorin's kept woman." Quoted in Henri Troyat, *Chekhov*, translated by Michael Henry Heim (New York: Dutton, 1986), 134.

<sup>21</sup>Letters, 107, 81.

<sup>22</sup>Not content with recklessly trying to leap over tall buildings in a single bound, the Speaker must make it his theme! —NOC

<sup>23</sup>We note the Speaker's irreverent allusion to Matthew 6:22: "if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light." But there is simply no room in the kingdom for his kind of foolish binocular vision: "if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out" (Matt. 5:29). —NOC

<sup>24</sup>*Odyssey*, translated by Richmond Latimore (1965; reprint ed., New York: Harper, 1967), 9.273-93. Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>25</sup>These unedifying details might have gone charitably unmentioned. —NOC

<sup>26</sup>This chapter of Leviticus, in current LDS copies, bears the following heading: "Israel commanded: Be holy, live righteously, love thy neighbor, and keep the commandments—The Lord reveals and reaffirms sundry laws and commandments—Enchantments, wizardry, prostitution, and all evil practices forbidden"; the recommendation regarding strangers is but one among "sundry" rules and other more important principles by which Israel is to keep itself holy.

<sup>27</sup>Once again it suits the Speaker not to cut the gross—and grotesquely incorrect—anatomical detail.

<sup>28</sup>An unwitting clue that the Speaker is at heart a pagan? —NOC

<sup>29</sup>Rightly so. —NOC

<sup>30</sup>*Ender's Game* (New York: TOR, 1985), 355.

<sup>31</sup>Careful readers will have noticed that Amulek has been instructed by "an angel" to "receive" Alma; thus, there is little evidence of a "habit" or "rule" among the Nephites. —NOC

<sup>32</sup>A typo, or one of his deliberate puns? But what fork would he have in mind here? —NOC

<sup>33</sup>This clowning is beneath comment. —NOC

<sup>34</sup>A covert allusion to that raucous drunk Dylan Thomas and the demi-pagan nostalgia of "Fern Hill"? "In the sun that is young once only, / Time let me play and be / Golden in the mercy of his means" (12-14). —NOC

<sup>35</sup>Possibly an allusion to a little-known book by Jonathan Bishop, *Something Else* (New York: Braziller, 1972), which the Speaker is known to have read and marked with some care. Bishop's even less-known book, *Who Is Who?* (Ithaca: Glad Day, 1975), may also lurk beneath the surface here. —NOC

<sup>36</sup>Called, chosen, and carefully coached, we may be sure. —NOC

<sup>37</sup>Here and throughout his retelling of New Testament stories, the Speaker paraphrases freely, though not enough to be charged with egregious travesty. At some points his renderings resemble the versions of Reynolds Price in *A Palpable God* (1978, reprint ed., San Francisco: North Point, 1985). —NOC

<sup>38</sup>Only here does the Speaker even slightly acknowledge

what should be obvious to anyone who lives in a house with a front door: not all strangers are nice guys; the stranger could be anybody, the Avon Lady or Prince Paris or Ted Bundy as well as the Prophet Elijah. —NOC

<sup>39</sup>No, see Mark 4:12, which is thoroughly germane to the issue here: "That seeing they may see, and not perceive; . . . lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them." —NOC

<sup>40</sup>Is the Speaker wresting the scriptures again? "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:39; cf. 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33). By some devious means he seems to have learned that "life" in the JKV translates the Greek *psyche*.

<sup>41</sup>We confess ourselves astonished, even in the sometimes lubricious purview of this Address, to suspect here a lurking and (to be charitable) possibly unconscious (and to us incomprehensible) allusion to Eudora Welty's *Losing Battles* (New York: Random, 1970), 362. Another, perhaps more likely antecedent is an episode in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by Maureen G. Kovacs (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989): Tablet XI, lines 266-91. —NOC

<sup>42</sup>Elder Dallin H. Oaks offered the definitive apostolic counsel on this: "Alternate Voices," *Ensign*, May 1989, 27-30. —NOC

<sup>43</sup>How very interesting—how sweet! Lips that touch Nietzsche shall never touch mine. —NOC

<sup>44</sup>Gigantic understatement. —NOC

<sup>45</sup>This word signals what we suspect is a pervasively dissolved influence in the Address, from Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (1969; reprint ed., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988), which announces in its Preface the book's project "to present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality" (27). —NOC

<sup>46</sup>The Speaker seems to have learned this remark from Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350* (New York: New American Library, 1962), 116. But he conveniently passes over the rest of the story: Abelard, a premature feminist and dangerous intellectual notorious for his scandalous affair with Heloise, was condemned as a heretic and banished to the monastery of Cluny; his adherents were excommunicated and his books were burned, Pope Innocent II himself (whose name speaks volumes) lighting the bonfire at St. Peter's. That Abelard's faith-croding *Sic et Non* should forerun the scholasticism of Peter Lombard and ultimately Thomas Aquinas, and that his elevation of Mary Magdalen above the militant saints should intitate a cult, are typical aberrations of apostate Christian history. —NOC

<sup>47</sup>Has the Speaker the temerity here to allude to Moroni 10:4: "And when ye shall receive these things . . ."? —NOC

<sup>48</sup>No comment. This "deconstructive" use of a sacred text speaks amply for—and against—itsself. —NOC

<sup>49</sup>The Speaker seems to have imbibed this notion from Richard Rorty's paper read to a faculty seminar 20 July 1990 at BYU: "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," typescript, 7. This essay has since appeared in Rorty's *Philosophical Papers 2: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni-

versity Press, 1991), 66-82. The quote appears on p. 69. His fancy word "essentialism" below occurs in the same source, though he claims to have made it up for himself and been using it for years. Likewise, his earlier allusion to "what Nietzsche called the 'ascetic priest'" seems to have been lifted from this paper, though we have seen one or more worn volumes of that self-styled "anti-Christ" Nietzsche on his own shelves. —NOC

<sup>50</sup>"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, . . . and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit [*Heb.*: striving after wind]" (Eccl. 1:2, 14). —NOC

<sup>51</sup>Could this, perchance, be an "essentialistic" remark?

<sup>52</sup>We've also overheard the Speaker say, promiscuously mixing metaphors, that "Reviewers always shoot from the hip, and often miss; they're plagued by premature ejaculation. And they often suffer from chronic contraceptive imagination." Out of his own mouth . . .

<sup>53</sup>Cracroft, Review, 122; the Rampton poem appears in *Harvest*, 141.

<sup>54</sup>Cracroft, Review, 122; the Evans poem is from *Harvest*, 172.

<sup>55</sup>Did the Speaker make up *Speckled Book*? At any rate, these references are to the aberrant tradition of Celtic Christianity. —NOC

<sup>56</sup>Such niggling tabulations are unworthy of the Spirit of True Criticism. And we are certain that the Reviewer's feminist credentials will be found impeccable. —NOC

<sup>57</sup>Cracroft, Review, 122-23.

<sup>58</sup>Barnyard rhetorical question! Moo! Moo! —NOC

<sup>59</sup>Cracroft, Review, 123.

<sup>60</sup>Yet another covert allusion, this time to John Crowe Ransom's "Captain Carpenter": To any adversary it is fame / If he risk to be wounded by my tongue / Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame / Such are the perils he is cast among." But to what intent? *Selected Poems*, 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991), lines 33-36. —NOC

<sup>61</sup>Unlucky numbers! Yet the Speaker plunges on. —NOC

<sup>62</sup>*The Company We Keep* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); the quotations which follow are from pp. 207, 201, 222. Brother Booth seems much more cautious than the Speaker about whom he allows into his living room. —NOC

<sup>63</sup>The dictionary supposedly quoted here has not been found, and we suspect an oblique thrust at Sister Elouise Bell's well-beloved celebration of that great green blessing of the Mormon garden, now gathered into her collection *Only When I Laugh* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1990). —NOC

<sup>64</sup>*The Future of the Novel*, edited by Leon Edel (New York: Vintage, 1956), 39.

<sup>65</sup>*Letters*, 37.

<sup>66</sup>Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 168-69.

<sup>67</sup>*Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, edited by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 179.

<sup>68</sup>*Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, 1969), 192.

<sup>69</sup>*The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove, 1988; Harper,

1988), 159.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 3-20.

<sup>71</sup>The Speaker has been promulgating this eccentric interpretation of Luke 15 for almost five years now, and its lack of popular acceptance is but one sign of its essential erroneousness. For a near-canonical reading of the Prodigal Son parable, see Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 307-11, which also quotes extensively from the earlier apostolic interpretation given by James E. Talmage in *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961 printing), 456-61. —NOC

<sup>72</sup>*Art of the Novel*, 160. The Speaker conveniently omits to note that Kundera also says, "I like to imagine that François Rabelais heard God's laughter one day, and thus was born the idea of the first great European novel. . . as the echo of God's laughter" (158). This discovery exposes his insidious agenda: this whole long performance has been a clandestine effort to stage an assignation between the Spirit of Rabelaisian laughter and the Spirit of Gospel Truth. But the lady won't show up. —NOC

<sup>73</sup>*Study of Thomas Hardy*, 198.

<sup>74</sup>*Letters*, edited by Aldous Huxley (New York: Viking, 1932), 198. It's like this nasty man to advocate exhibitionism and "joint work." And what's this about being "altered" by women? The fool under the trenchcoat deserves it! —NOC

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>76</sup>*Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (1984; reprint ed., New York: Vintage, 1986), 41.

<sup>77</sup>*Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (1983; reprint ed., New York: Vintage, 1985), 135.

<sup>78</sup>"Looking Back at the First Story," *Georgia Review* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1979), 755.

<sup>79</sup>*A Common Room* (New York: Atheneum, 1987), 375.

<sup>80</sup>"In Praise of Ourselves: Stories to Tell," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 5-24; the quoted phrase occurs on 23.

<sup>81</sup>"Two Years Sunday," *Wasatch Review* 1, no. 1 (1992): 25-36; Levi Peterson, "My Mother's House," *Dialogue* 24 (Fall 1991): 79-88.

# Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature

Richard H. Cracroft<sup>1</sup>

## I

ESSENTIALISM IS THE PROBLEM," proclaimed my colleague, Bruce W. Jorgensen in his 1991 presidential address<sup>2</sup> to this distinguished body of Latter-day Saint writers, critics, publishers, and readers, thereby fixing his sights on an elusive problem which is central to the purposes of the Association for Mormon Letters and to future Mormon literary criticism. Elevating to Pearl Harbor status, my review<sup>3</sup> of Eugene England and Dennis Clark's important but spiritually bifurcated anthology, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), Jorgensen dive-bombs my review, zeroing in with sophic glee on my attempts to show the presence and absence of the spiritual essence of Mormonism in the works of contemporary Mormon poets. Urging a Mormon literature which is hospitable to the stranger at the gate as well as to the next-door-neighbor, Jorgensen firmly shuts his door on my assertion that an anthology subtitled "Contemporary Mormon Poems" should reflect a Mormon *Weltanschauung* and ethos, insisting at last that "Maybe Mormonism itself has no 'essence' but only a story," and asserting that, "It's a striving after wind to pursue the 'essence' of Mormon literature."<sup>4</sup>

"Essentialism is the problem" of my review, insists Jorgensen, and he is right. Just as I am right about the fact that essentialism is also the answer to the need to center and ground modern Mormon criticism. Allow me to remind the reader of the contexts of Jorgensen's claim: In my review of *Harvest*, I assert that which is apparent to any right-thinking, red-blooded, and sanctified Latter-day Saint who reads the poems sequentially, attentively, and (big gulp here) *spiritually* and *essentially*—that a surprisingly large number of the poems written by Mormon poets and included in the "New Directions" section of *Harvest*

selected by Dennis Clark are skillfully executed poems grounded in the "earth-bound humanism" of our contemporary secular society but reflecting little or no essential Mormonism.<sup>5</sup> It seems to me, as I state in my review, that such poems, mislabeled "Mormon," lack, ignore, repress, or replace the Mormon "essence" so essential to distinguishing a work of Mormon letters from a work which is merely Western or American or Protestant or Jewish. If a work of literature is written by a Latter-day Saint and sails under the title of "Mormon," it is, I believe, the duty of a Mormon literary critic to point out for the potential readership, which inevitably will be mostly Mormon, the presence or lack of such Mormonness.

In describing western novels, the late Virginia Sorensen Waugh says that western writers and readers have, in addition to telling with integrity the human stories of life in the American West, "the responsibility of preserving some web of significance men can live by."<sup>6</sup> Present-day readers, writers, and critics of Mormon literature and members of the Association for Mormon Letters are part of what amounts to the first generation of critics of a nascent Mormon literature. We are likewise weaving and identifying—privileging—and scrutinizing this aborning Mormon literature to trace a "[larger] web of [deeper] significance," which—if truly Mormon—is being woven out of the stuff of Mormonism and spun across a Mormon worldview interlaced with Mormon essences, those often ethereal but real, ineffable but inevitable, spiritual analogues and correspondences which convey Mormon realities and without a sense of which no literature could be essentially Mormon. Such is at least part of the responsibility of the Mormon critic.

But there is an obstacle which must be confronted by members of the Association for Mormon Letters

and by the contemporary and future Mormon critic. Most of us who devoutly study Mormon literature are Latter-day Saints of some variety—garden, hybrid, or noxious weed. More or less, we share a love for the Mormon Idea, for Mormon doctrine; we see the world Mormonly; or we love the Mormon ethos—its tradition and culture and history; or, at very least we are curious about what happens when Things Mormon hit a fan called Things Non-Mormon, Things Worldly. Still, the obstacle persists: It is (for some—surely not the present reader) our inner *Schweinhund*, our doubting, skeptical, sophic, eye-single-to-the-glory of secular humanism willingness to be hospitable to virtually any attack upon our own Church or its leaders, to substitute almost any cause or complaint for fixing our souls to the cross of Christ, to overlay the prevailing, faithless worldview on our once bright faith in the Restoration.

Whether we trail our Mormonness behind us, conceal it, or wear it on our sleeves, most of us who constitute the LDS literati leave our Mormon home places to become steeped at our various worldly universities in the alluring secular *Weltanschauung* of a relentless, overweening, skeptical and triumphant empiricism. Then, having absorbed the world and all of its attractive graces and having replaced the spiritual authority figures of our youth with new-found sophic authorities, we sally to our separate Zions in the tops of the mountains, flourishing newly won and brightly burnished “objectivity,” a quiver-full of tyrannical and dogmatic literary ideologies, bristling with a wonderful array of arcane critical tools, and a helmet brimming with ardent appreciation for those who profess the gospels of immoralism, atheism, nihilism, negativism, perversity, rebelliousness, doubt, disbelief, and disorder. With a worldview fraught with what Thomas Mann has called a “sympathy for the abyss,”<sup>7</sup> we survey the field, full of troops ill-equipped with Urims and Thummims, Liahonas, and the peepstones of faith, we strap on the breastplate of humanism and lower our lances of Marxism, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, feminism, or reformed new criticism and boot-up our computers in the cause of Mormon letters—*sans* its so-called (shudder) essences.

## II

But what to our wondering eyes should appear but the Mormon audience—the orthodox Latter-day Saints who, to our embarrassment, resemble our own believing and innocent former selves—the selves we shelved in the cause of the worldly philosophies. Though we generally succeed in ignoring that Mormon audience—talking by them, or dismissing them as ignorant and incompetent—at some point we who do battle for Mormon letters must confront the fact that they are our constituency, the only audience likely to listen to us, the only group to whom Mormon critics and this association have any real obligation. To Sidney Smith’s 1819 query, rephrased, “Who in the world reads a [Mormon] book?” we must answer, Mormons—until such time as someone organizes “Gentiles for Mormon Literature” or promotes an “Ex-Mormons for Mormon Literature” night at the local high school gym.

And if teaching the Latter-day Saints about Mormon literature is at least part of our work and our glory, what is it, then, that we should keep in mind about our audience? What is it which makes them orthodox? “Orthodoxy,” says Eugene England, the founder of our feast, means to be

*focused on the great central ideals and values of a group. In Mormonism . . . that means being committed to the optimistic view of life, to faith in Christ and his Atonement as sufficient and powerful to save us from ignorance and sin, to a liberal concept of the nature of humans and of God and to a conservative moral life, based in reason and committed service.*<sup>8</sup>

Such a definition makes no differentiation between *Christian* and *Mormon* and does not define the Latter-day Saint at the center of the faith. My experience over twenty years in many thousands of personal interviews with salt-of-earth, temple-recommend-holding and, thus, orthodox Latter-day Saints, is that the “central ideals and values” of a majority of ecclesiastically active Saints are more or less rooted in essences of spirituality shared by those whom Jeffrey C. Jacob has called “charismatics,” men and women who do not fit comfortably in Richard Poll’s classifi-



cations of "Iron Rodders" or "Liahonas," but whose lives are informed by and whose values are centered in a personal, dynamic theology of momentary supernal expectation; men and women who, in the face of an overwhelmingly secular society consciously cultivate "a sense of God in their lives" and seek about them "the presence of the divine," eschewing faithlessness, doubt, and rebellion—not coddling it—and quietly enduring uncertainty while seeking to elevate "the place of the Holy Spirit in their lives, . . . as an independent source of guidance and inspiration." Such charismatic Latter-day Saints seek, says Jacob, a "personal relationship with Christ."<sup>9</sup> Such, I believe, stand at the center of Mormon orthodoxy.

It is vital to the future of LDS literature that Mormon critics, scholars, and publishers—people who are not, generally, this charismatic kind of Latter-day Saint—would do well to remember that, when they solicit the attention of a Latter-day Saint reader, they are treading on holy ground occupied by the potential protagonists of Mormon letters, by inconsistent, foible-ridden, groping men and women, who nevertheless differ from other believers, as Joseph Smith said to President Martin Van Buren, through "the gift of the Holy Ghost."<sup>10</sup>

In such men and women, the Godhead is lively; they expect the presence of the Godhead in their lives; they believe in the literal reality of God as a sensate, corporeal being who lives on the planet nearest Kolob; they believe in Jehovah, who is Jesus Christ, the creator of earth and the Savior of humankind; and they believe in the possibility of gaining what Christ called "life eternal," of coming to know Elohim and Jehovah (John 17:3), through what Stephen L. Tanner calls "empiricism of the spirit."<sup>11</sup> Herein is the great difference—that Latter-day Saints believe that the Father and His Son *can* and *may* and *do* intervene in mortal lives—and may do so momentarily—to assist mortals in their individual and collective courses. They believe that Joseph Smith, Jr., is one of those chosen prophets in whose life the godhead intervened to effect the opening of the last dispensation of the fulness of times; and they believe that each Latter-day Saint is part of the dynamics of God's uttering again to the whole earth—to the living and the dead—the good

news of the redemptive acts of Jesus Christ, and, in his stead, of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Latter-day Saint sees as his or her mission the preparation of a Zion people (beginning with their own families) for the second advent of Jesus Christ. En route, the Saints must walk by faith, not skepticism and doubt, learning, as Brigham Young called it, to be "righteous in the dark,"<sup>12</sup> but directed according to the will of the Father and personal righteousness, by the prophets, holy scripture, including the Book of Mormon, translated from ancient records through the gift and power of God, the holy priesthood, and by individual access to the Holy Spirit through the dynamics of personal inspiration and revelation from the Godhead to every faithful and worthy member of the Church of Christ.

I believe that such orthodoxy prevails, more or less, among the Latter-day Saints and thus among Mormon readers—though certainly not in certain circles—present company *accepted*. It is those central and orthodox beliefs which can spark literary imaginations; and it is that orthodox audience whose imaginations Latter-day Saint writers and critics can spark—if their own lives are informed by such orthodoxy. These beliefs, indelibly etched on the souls of each Latter-day Saint, are the home base to which each Mormon returns after venturing into the bewildering world where temptations and sins of omission and commission and insistent and persuasive voices and presences cry, "Lo, here" and "Lo, there." It is against these pillars of Mormon orthodoxy that roughly half of the Latter-day Saints lean, while planting their footing in the shifting sands of mortality and taking a spiritual fix on Kolob. They strain and sweat and err and falter under their weary, mortal loads; but remembering that at least one definition of a Saint is that of a "sinner who kept on going," they plod on, cockeyed—one eye fixed on Kolob and the other fixed on the next, deceptive step in front of them.

I admire the plodding Latter-day Saint, them of the last wagon—or the middle or the front, for that matter; and I believe that, collectively, they are about as faithful and good-hearted and Christian a people as exist on the face of the earth. I believe that their struggles toward sainthood are the stuff of a great

moral literature; and that poetry and fiction and drama can be a blessing to such in their mortal wanderings, clarifying their vision and giving uplift and instruction, creating delight and beauty.

We who write and critique and publish for the Saints must not forget, then, that these are people who have followed Joseph to their individual sacred groves and struggled up the mountain, returning to their dailinesses forever altered in vision and countenance, their lives centered in Jesus Christ and irrevocably altered by the historic events of the Restoration and the occurrences of the Holy Ghost in their lives, much as Pip's view of matter was altered by what he saw in the fathomless depths beneath the *Pequod*. Among that believing people whose literary expression we undertake, encourage and promote, are many who would echo C. S. Lewis's (paraphrased) statement about Christianity: "I believe in [Mormonism] as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."<sup>13</sup>

Such indelible belief posits a controlling metaphor by which Mormons experience the world and through which we can communicate with the Saints. Metaphors assist us, asserts Neil Postman, in constructing reality: "We make the world according to our own imagery," he affirms, and those images and metaphors express "some of our most fundamental conceptions of the way things are."<sup>14</sup> Imbued with the sense that "all things . . . are spiritual" (D&C 29:34) and "are created . . . to bear record of" God (Moses 6:63), the Latter-day Saints attempt "to live," as President Marion G. Romney would say of President Harold B. Lee, "in the shadow of the Almighty,"<sup>15</sup> to see the world as emblematic and anagogical, like the nomadic Abraham, who wrote that "eternity was our covering and our rock and our salvation, as we journeyed from Haran . . . to the land of Canaan" (Abr. 2:16). This Latter-day Saint metaphor of the plan of salvation, with each Saint slogging, via Babylon, on a pilgrim's progress towards Zion's Celestial City, informs Mormon reality and becomes a tenacious presence in the LDS soul. Ask any who have left the Church how difficult it is to slough off and switch the metaphor.

In fact, it makes a remarkable difference to a writer and a reader if both writer and reader make God and humankind constantly present on his or her world stage, see the world anagogically, emblematically, and typologically, or by the light of the metaphor of men and women as children of heavenly parentage and mortality as a way-station in eternity. Or if he or she sees the world modernly—as a dead-end street, and men and women and their self-serving institutions as deluded and misguided, worshipping a fabricated projection of their own minds and needs.

If we who are Mormon writers, critics, and publishers wish to speak to the Saints, we must speak to them through LDS metaphors. We cannot dismiss or belittle or patronize them merely because we have supplanted their metaphors or because they refuse to set their familiar metaphors aside. This people deserves a literature grounded in Mormon metaphors, exuding their essences, mirroring their dualistic world, establishing their vision of themselves as pilgrims wandering by faith across a twilight stage, buffeted by the forces of evil, seeking the forces of good, and wondering at the shadows and ambiguities to be found between these bewildering parentheses in eternity. Again, the very stuff of literature.

Should LDS writers and critics and publishers continue to feed these men and women stones when they ask for the bread of life shaped from the stuff of the mortal experiences, good and bad, of fellow believers? When it is the Mormon essence which enlivens these metaphors and speaks to the souls of the LDS reader, can writers and critics continue to countenance Jorgensen's statement that "it is a striving after wind to pursue the 'essence' of Mormon literature"?<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, as Elder Orson F. Whitney urges, in his "Home Literature" sermon of 1888, "The Holy Ghost is the genius of 'Mormon' literature."<sup>17</sup>

Faithful Latter-day Saints need, as I need, and so many Latter-day Saints need, a Mormon literature which enables us to explore common metaphors, to probe how one copes as a faithful Latter-day Saint with the junctures between the vertical and the horizontal, between the love of God and the love of our fellow beings, between the wearisome today and the promise of tomorrow—confrontations which exude

essences of spiritual realities while dealing with the stuff which makes for a representative literature "which," as President Spencer W. Kimball expressed it at BYU's 1976 centennial celebration, "edifies man, which takes into account his immortal nature, and which prepares us for heaven."<sup>18</sup> Some years ago, Bruce Jorgensen expressed well his similar need: "I need Mormon literature," he wrote. "I need to understand and share Mormon experience, need to imagine it as a way to understand, in pain and joy, myself, my brothers and sisters, my Brother, my Father."<sup>19</sup> We all need such a literature.

### III

In the midst of these Saints, each adventuring along the gap between celestial ideals and telestial realities, stand the Mormon writer, critic, and publisher, literary midwives to our Mormon experiences. While too many popular modern LDS writers mistake sentimentality for spirituality and sell their art and their audiences short, distrusting as they do the spiritual sensitivity and intelligence of the Mormon audience (the subject for another day), too many of the artistically gifted literati are ignoring essential Mormonism in their writing, criticism, and publication and continue to insist, with Jorgensen, that it is futile to seek for "an elusive metaphysical or 'essential' notion of 'spirituality'" in shaping a Mormon literature for this people.<sup>20</sup>

Lacking a firmly founded center stake, then, modern Mormon criticism, like Mormon literature, is unsettled and uncentered, too prone to follow Corianton a-whoring across distant and exotic horizons after the shallow attractions of blind secularism, visionless and perverse fault-seeking, skeptical and compromising humanism, and hearkening to Babylon's glib but hollow and faithless voices. Ignoring the spiritual essence of Mormonism, the very essence which differentiates Mormonism from other believers and from the world, too many of our modern writers and critics—the *creme de la creme* of Mormon letters—have bound themselves to the literary masts of the world rather than orthodoxy, and become "like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed" (James 1:6).

The consequences are clear: as Latter-day Saints read the literature of doubt and dissonance so often applauded by Mormon critics and the Association for Mormon Letters, they register dismay on reading short stories, novels, poetry, and drama which fail to reflect a Mormon worldview with which they can identify. Such a literature of shock, supported by a justifying criticism continues to create a gap of distrust between critic and reader. Repeatedly, Latter-day Saints positioned at the center of the Mormon experience must put down the latest Mormon novel or collection of poetry and sigh with J. Alfred Prufrock, "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all."<sup>21</sup>

The reason for the confusion lies with Latter-day Saint writers and critics who, unable to write out of faith or to leave off skepticism, attempt in their writing to have their faith and doubt it too. It is the ancient paradox of Goethe's *Faust*: "Two souls alas! are dwelling in my breast."<sup>22</sup> It is the old, old dualism of Plato, Paul, Kant, Coleridge, and Emerson. Hugh Nibley labels it as the mantic versus the sophic "two fundamentally antithetical ways of perceiving the world."<sup>23</sup> Positing the reality of other worlds, the mantic worldview, based in the Greek word for *inspired*, *prophetic*, or *oracular*, is simply "vertical supernaturalism."<sup>24</sup> Manticism is not mysticism but "the belief in the real and present operation of divine gifts by which one receives constant guidance from the other world."<sup>25</sup> The "sophic world view of horizontal naturalism," on the other hand, confines all realities to the natural order,<sup>26</sup> is "necessarily antireligious," critical, objective, naturalistic, scientific, and horizontal in attitude. And though the sophic has as its purpose "the elimination of the supernatural or superhuman,"<sup>27</sup> it can only be understood in relationship to the mantic, believing tradition against which it is reacting.

Antithetical to the mantic Mormon worldview, the sophic nevertheless reigns triumphant in Western culture and has had a vigorous impact upon contemporary Latter-day Saints. It has become a given in our society to think of the supernal as mere superstition, and of notions of God, eschatology, redemption, and theophany as quaint and outmoded. "Modern men take it for granted," asserts Rudolf Bultmann,

"that the course of nature and of history . . . is *nowhere* interrupted by the intervention of supernatural powers."<sup>28</sup>

Certainly "all have not faith" among the Latter-day Saints, and Mormon literature must continue to be hospitable to the writings of those among the Latter-day Saints who are struggling with doubt and are torn by the old tensions. But such works must be understood and criticized from the Latter-day Saint standpoint and not in such a manner as to advance the sophic worldview as representative of Mormonism.

These mantic-sophic tensions so evident in contemporary Mormon literature find parallels in the in the often acrimonious struggle currently being waged between new Mormon historians and traditional Mormon historians, between those sophics who understand events as proceeding from natural causes and who balk at the historicity of theophanies, visitations, and golden plates; and those mantics who see such as occurrences arising from divine intervention and purpose.<sup>29</sup>

In modern literature, the sophic position ascended with literary realism, a technique become a philosophy which is, in Thomas Carlyle's word, "descendental," or nontranscendental. "The realists," claims Harold H. Kolb, Jr., in his fine treatise, *The Illusion of Life*, "cannot accept supernaturalism, Platonic idealism, and the worlds of spirit. They do not necessarily deny the validity of such worlds; they simply ignore them as unknowable in ordinary human terms and thus irrelevant to ordinary human experience."<sup>30</sup> This sophic-realistic denial of such essences as irrelevant characterizes the literature of what is increasingly called the post-religious or post-Christian age and translates variously into twentieth-century American literature as literary naturalism, modernism, existentialism, or nihilism. By whatever philosophy, writers have been anxiously engaged, since around the American Civil War, in "horizontalizing the vertical tradition."<sup>31</sup>

Mormon writers and critics have been schooled in this sophic literary tradition and unnaturally apply it to the mantic tradition of Mormon letters. It is no wonder, then, that Jorgensen would shudder at examining essences, no wonder that a great deal of confusion has resulted, no wonder that there is no solid

center to Mormon criticism or Mormon literature. Often torn in our own faith between mantic and sophic traditions, we are even more confounded as sophic critics by the task of dealing with the mantic world in sophic terms—the only way we know how. It is in this context that we must understand President Spencer W. Kimball's call for a literature and, by inference, a criticism of our own, centered in mantic Mormonism and dealing honestly and literarily with human life as experienced by Latter-day Saints. Orson F. Whitney was referring to the essential difference between an LDS and a worldly literature when he said, "Our literature must live and breathe for itself. Our mission is diverse from all others; our literature must also be."<sup>32</sup>

But in Mormon criticism, the confusion between the mantic and sophic stances continues. A typical illustration of such doublemindedness is seen in Eugene England's enthusiastic but sophic review for a primarily mantic *BYU Studies* audience of Levi S. Peterson's well-crafted, imaginative, serio-comic, obstinately perverse, and theologically non-Mormon novel, *The Backslider*. England describes with reverence—and to the stunned disbelief of many *BYU Studies* readers who are not part of the frequent gatherings of sophic Saints (the Inward Church below?)—Frank's culminating, *deus ex machina* vision which comes as he zips up his pants before a flushing urinal in which he suddenly sees an aw-shucks Cowboy Jesus who straightens Frank out by dishing out, while rolling and smoking a Bull Durham cigarette, homely counsel about Frank's sexual hangups, his guilt over sensual indulgences with his wife, and his longstanding quarrel with a vindictive, Tetragrammaton kind of God. Jesus's advice to Frank, as he rides off on his horse, is, "And work on that crap about hating God. See if you can get over it." Frank culminates this descendentially transcendental travesty by flushing the urinal again, retching, vomiting, then crying.<sup>33</sup> Then England culminates his review of *Backslider*:

*That vision is one of the most lovely and believable epiphanies I have encountered in modern fiction. It is the capstone to an extraordinary achievement, not only in thematic content that is seriously theological but in form that is meticulously crafted to give permanent being to that content.*<sup>34</sup>

My own sophic literary sensibilities cheer England's testimonial. *The Backslider* is true and faithful to a sophic and secular vision of literature. But my mantic sensibilities recoil, as have so many Latter-day Saint readers who, approaching this work of Mormon literature touted by England and others, are shocked by this profanation of Christ, as they are by the grotesque God of Frank's strange, quasi-Calvinistic—but decidedly not LDS—theology.

Perhaps the book speaks profoundly to readers who are grappling with the guilt imposed on them by LDS-Christian theology, enabling them to look closely at the pin which skewers their souls. However, for many mantic LDS souls, I have discovered, *The Backslider* speaks with a shocking, disconcerting dissonance which seems unauthentic and off-putting.

A number of such works have come to characterize much of the better-written contemporary Mormon fiction. And much of our contemporary LDS criticism about such works is likewise centered in sophic secularity. And where sophic and mantic criticism come into confrontation, the sophists—who edit the journals and privilege the books to be reviewed and the reviewers who do the reviewing—hasten to correct any mantic misstatements, just as my criticism of a number of the *Harvest* gleanings as excellent sophic but certainly not LDS-mantic poems is countered by Bruce W. Jorgensen with attempts to shoehorn, stretch, and thus skew these poems into expressions of the LDS ethos, much like the painful attempts of Cinderella's ugly sisters to wedge a large foot into a dainty glass slipper. Such sophic strivings do not resonate with those who share the Mormon vision and seek in their literature the essences of Mormonism. There can be congeniality between the two positions, and hospitality without accommodation, but there can never be comfortable compromise of mantic and sophic viewpoints.

#### IV

What I have said can be misconstrued, I realize, as being exclusionary, even elitist. I do not mean it to be such. Nothing that I say here will change the fact that most of the best writing in Mormon literature has been done by the sophics, who have bones to

pick and axes (and teeth) to grind, and divine itches which need to be scratched. The mantics are too busy doing their home teaching—and making statements which pain the sophics. Nothing that I say here will change the nature of a single struggling doubter or, for that matter, of a struggling charismatic—for we all struggle.

I simply suggest that the Mormon literati must understand that the large majority of the Latter-day Saints are not responding to a literature and a criticism which seem to them unauthentic. It is a ladder leaning against the wrong wall. Of course the sophic will continue to write a literature which reflects his or her reactive worldview, but we must understand that such a worldview will continue to feel unauthentic to the charismatic Latter-day Saint.

I affirm Candadai Seshachari's admonition: "For the Mormon writer, the creative center of his subjectivity lies not so much in what he shares with the rest of mankind but in that unique Mormon experience which he shares with fellow Mormons," adding, "This experience defines his being," for "it is through this singular experience that he [the Mormon writer] asserts his individuality, indeed, his humanity."<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein, Don D. Walker has noted, "To write with integrity for readers who understand that integrity, writers need a tradition, a system of moral values in which they can make meaningful judgments—they need a frame of belief."<sup>36</sup>

The challenge to the LDS writer who desires to touch the lives of his or her people is to write honestly and well, from within this frame of shared belief in the vision of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to probe the lives of faithful men and women confronting a sophic society, a difficult world, and a self which seems ever to fall short of achieving the ideal. How much better does anyone accept direction and challenge from one who understands, empathizes, shares—and believes!

In increasing number in every literary genre, the voices are there which speak to the Saints from within the fold, with power, authenticity, and integrity. The Association of Mormon Letters has honored a number of them today. In fiction alone, we find, for example, the powerful and freeing fantasy of Orson Scott

Card's *Seventh Son*, *The Red Prophet*, and *Prentice Alvin*, centered in the essences which moved the Maker, Alvin Miller, Jr., who parallels in so many ways the Prophet Joseph; or in Card's novel, *Saints*, where he portrays Dinah, the gentile soul adrift in Babylon, brings her to conversion at the hands of the sincere and profane Heber C. Kimball (surely the finest portrayal to date of a Mormon missionary at work), and lifts her out of Babylon at dramatic personal cost.<sup>37</sup> Or the power of Marilyn M. Brown in *The Earthkeepers*, in which she narrows the canvas, as William Mulder urges, but not the expansive spirit of Mormondom.<sup>38</sup> Or Gerald N. Lund's notable and prize-winning contributions to LDS historical fiction, moving readers first by the twice-told truths of the restoration and again by the reader's vicarious participation, through the Steed family, in their individual spiritual confrontations with Mormonism; Lund is true to the essence of Mormonism in, among other scenes, Mary Ann Steed's moving conversion to Mormonism as she listens to the Prophet Joseph reading aloud from 3 Nephi.<sup>39</sup> Or in Margaret B. Young's Jewish conversion novel, *House Without Walls*; or in Randall L. Hall's *Cory Davidson*; or Carroll Hofeling Morris's *The Broken Covenant*, well-written chronicles of the breaking and contrition of hearts following transgression; or Kathryn Kidd's comically authentic *Paradise Vue*; or, recently, the movingly refreshing evocation of the essence of universal spirituality in Judith Freeman's *Set For Life*—not a Mormon novel but a mantic one.<sup>40</sup> Or what seems still to be the best fictional expression of Mormonism's essences to date, the sequential stories of Eileen Gibbons Kump's *Bread & Milk*, a cycle which follows Amy Gordon through a Latter-day Saint life which is quietly but strongly centered in the Mormon ethos. For example, Kump concludes the book with an essential moment, as the now elderly and widowed Amy Gordon, suffering from mortal symptoms while writing her recollection of her wedding day, dissolves the veil in a wonderfully Mormon *coup de force*:

*Amy took the pencil and began to write. There was a numbness in her arm, slight but not imaginary. She wrote regardless, driven to preserve the picture. . . . When she was finished, she fell back-*

*ward. Then she let go of the pencil. "Please," she said aloud. "I want the memory of my wedding day!" She was in her white dress, waiting, and Israel hadn't come yet. She started to cry and there he was, arms outstretched, hurrying toward her. Only this time the hair and mustache were white.*<sup>41</sup>

The day-dawn is breaking, as it should—and with our support—for the subject matter is there, if Mormon writers will accept the challenge to deal with the subjects Mormonly. "It does seem odd," the late Karl Keller wrote in 1974, "that of all the things Mormon writers of fiction have had to offer the world, they have not yet offered it their beliefs, their theology, the gospel."<sup>42</sup>

However post-structurally or Marxianly or feministically, the modern critic who is a Mormon wishes to deal with horizontal literature, it is his or her challenge when acting as an LDS critic to promote a truly Mormon literature, to read and critique LDS writing with eyes of faith, with feet firm-set in Mormon metaphors. Then, allowing the LDS writer his or her *donnée*, that his or her work is faithfully grounded in the mantic realities of the spiritual world, in important essences, to sound that work for honesty, integrity, and authenticity, to subject that portrayal of Mormon reality to the most rigorous literary standards. It is the critic's responsibility to understand the essential Mormonness of the work, to place the work within the Mormon tradition and ethos, to place it in the literary tradition of gentile writers, to show where and how it succeeds, and why, and if it falls short, why—but, for a pleasant change, from the window of the Latter-day Saint's house of fiction—or verse.

We need, for a refreshing change, an alternative criticism, a Latter-day Saint criticism centered in the gospel, in Mormon faith, and not in the sophic creeds of secularism. By "faithful criticism," I do not mean a criticism which shuts its eyes to falseness or to the lies of sentimentalism, or which promotes tidy didacticism and *deus ex machina* conclusions. I do not call for a literary divining rod to be bestowed on qualified LDS critics for the purpose of detecting the presence of the Holy Ghost—although given Elder Whitney's pronouncement that the Holy Ghost is the

genius of Mormon literature such wouldn't hurt. What we need is faithful critics who cultivate the presence of the Holy Ghost, who are themselves faithful Latter-day Saints who have been to the mountain, who understand the mantic Mormon paradigm of the world, who are willing to grant the *donnée* of faith and belief and the exciting spirit of expectation, the possibility of holiness, the eventuality of the finger of the Lord enlivening the Latter-day Saint life, critics who will formulate a criticism which can deal honestly, authentically, and artistically with that kind of worldview.

Given this green and vibrant world (and otherworld view), the possibilities are limitless. The way to perfection, which Joseph Smith compared to a ladder, is arduous and long and fraught with missteps and backward steps—the stuff of fiction and poetry and drama. Eternal lives arise from hard-won experience in the crucible of mortality, where we learn that the old verities are eternal in fact and mortal in application. Mormon artists have the opportunity, within their own framework and metaphors of faith, “To *make* a world,” wrote Karl Keller, “where the factors of one’s faith actually become realities.”<sup>43</sup>

Doing justice, as he noted elsewhere, “to the visible world because it suggests to [the writer] an invisible one,”<sup>44</sup> the Mormon critic will avoid mixing the metaphor and thus falsifying the sound. He or she will seek to identify and shape a literature which can probe the essences, and the authentic Mormon voice, long recognized by the Latter-day Saint reader who knows the voice of the Shepherd, will rise above its present murmur as William Mulder prophesied in 1954: “Mormon literature will move toward the promise of its highly articulate beginnings,” he wrote, “for Mormon readers will demand of Mormon writers authentic voices, whether in fiction, in history, in biography, or in missionary tract—the authority of good writing, of truths made memorable.”<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Richard H. Cracroft, professor of English at Brigham Young University since 1963, is co-compiler with Neal E. Lambert of *A Believing People: The Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1974; reprinted in 1979)

and *Twenty-two Young Mormon Writers* (Provo, Utah: Communications Workshop, 1975). He delivered this presidential address at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 25 January 1992 at Westminster College of Salt Lake City. It is, in part, a response to the 1991 presidential address of Bruce W. Jorgensen. I do not cite but highly recommend Stephen L. Tanner’s insightful essay, “Spiritual Problems in the Teaching of Modern Literature,” *Dialogue* 4 (Winter 1969): 26-38.

<sup>2</sup>“To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say,” *Annual*, (Salt Lake City: Association for Mormon Letters, 1992), 19-33.

<sup>3</sup>Richard H. Cracroft, Review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, edited by Eugene England and Dennis Clark, *BYU Studies* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 119-23.

<sup>4</sup>Jorgensen, “To Tell and Hear Stories,” 27.

<sup>5</sup>Cracroft, Review, 122.

<sup>6</sup>“Is It True? The Novelist and His [sic] Materials,” *Western Humanities Review* 8 (1953): 283.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in “Introduction,” *Literary Modernization*, edited by Irving Howe (Greenwich, Conn., 1967), 14.

<sup>8</sup>“Books for Mormons,” *This People* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 60.

<sup>9</sup>Jeffrey C. Jacob, “Explorations in Mormon Social Character: Beyond the Liahona and Iron Rod,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 48-49.

<sup>10</sup>As quoted in Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1977), 271.

<sup>11</sup>“Spiritual Empiricism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Autumn 1974): 50.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Eugene England, *Brother Brigham* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1980), 190.

<sup>13</sup>“Is Theology Poetry?” in *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), 92; see also Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), item #188.

<sup>14</sup>*Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 123-24. My thanks to Don Fossum for introducing these ideas to me.

<sup>15</sup>Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1977), 208. President Romney first made this remark at President Lee’s funeral.

<sup>16</sup>Jorgensen, “To Tell and Hear Stories,” 27.

<sup>17</sup>“Home Literature,” in *A Believing People: The Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, edited by Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, (Provo: BYU Press, 1974), 206. Whitney’s essay was first published in the July 1888 *Contributor*.

<sup>18</sup>“Second Century Address,” *BYU Studies* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 454.

<sup>19</sup>“Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 61.

<sup>20</sup>Jorgensen, “To Tell and Hear Stories,” 27.

<sup>21</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," T. S. Eliot: *Selected poems* (1930; reprint. ed., New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1936), 15.

<sup>22</sup>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Parts 1 and 2*, translated by George Madison Priest (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1941), I.ii (Vor dem Tor).

<sup>23</sup>"Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic," 311-79; and "Paths That Stray: Some Notes on Sophic and Mantic," 380-478, in *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled*, edited by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co./Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 314.

<sup>24</sup>H. Curtis Wright, "A Sophic and a Mantic People," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 55.

<sup>25</sup>Nibley, *The Ancient State*, 316.

<sup>26</sup>Wright, "A Sophic and a Mantic People," 51.

<sup>27</sup>Nibley, *The Ancient State*, 383.

<sup>28</sup>*Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 15-17; italics mine.

<sup>29</sup>See James Thrower, *The Alternative Tradition: Religion and the Rejection of Religion in the Ancient World* (The Hague: Moulton, 1980), 229; Louis Midgley, "The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity," in *By Study and Also by Faith, Volume 2*, edited by John M. Lundquist and Stephen Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co./Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 504.

<sup>30</sup>*The Illusion of Life: American Realism as a Literary Form* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969), 38.

<sup>31</sup>Wright, "A Sophic and a Mantic People," 57.

<sup>32</sup>"Home Literature," 206.

<sup>33</sup>*The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 356.

<sup>34</sup>"Beyond 'Jack Fiction': Recent Achievements in the Mormon Novel," *BYU Studies* 28 (Spring 1988): 101.

<sup>35</sup>"Insights from the Outside: Thoughts for the Mormon Writer," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 109. This essay also appears in *Arts and Inspiration*, edited by Steven P. Sondrup (Provo: BYU Press, 1980).

<sup>36</sup>As quoted in William Mulder, "Mormonism and Literature," in Cracroft and Lambert, *A Believing People*, 210. This essay was originally printed in *Western Humanities Review* 9 (Winter 1954-55). See also quotations from portions of this essay in "Telling It Slant: Aiming for Truth in Contemporary Mormon Fiction," in this volume.

<sup>37</sup>Orson Scott Card, *Seventh Son* (New York: Tor, 1987), *The Red Prophet* (New York: Tor, 1988), *Prentice Alvin* (New York: Tor, 1989). This series is collectively entitled *Tales of Alvin Maker*. Card, *Saints* (New York: Tor, 1988), originally published as *A Woman of Destiny* (New York: Berkley Books, 1984).

<sup>38</sup>Marilyn M. Brown, *The Earthkeepers*. This novel is being reprinted in two volumes by Covenant Communications of American Fork, Utah.

<sup>39</sup>*Pillar of Light* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 331. See also volumes 2 and 3 in *The Work and the Glory* series, also by Bookcraft: *Like a Fire Is Burning* (1991) and *Truth Will Prevail* (1992).

<sup>40</sup>Margaret B. Young, *House Without Walls* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991); Randall L. Hall, *Cory Davidson* (N.p.: Thomson Productions, 1984); Carroll Hofeling Morris, *The Broken Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985); Kathryn Kidd, *Paradise Vue* (Greensboro, N.C.: Hatrack River Publication, 1989); Judith Freeman, *Set For Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

<sup>41</sup>Kump, *Bread & Milk and Other Stories* (Provo: BYU Press, 1979), 91.

<sup>42</sup>"The Example of Flannery O'Connor," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 62.

<sup>43</sup>"The Example of Flannery O'Connor," 71.

<sup>44</sup>Keller, "On Words and the Word of God: The Delusions of a Mormon Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Autumn 1969): 13-20.

<sup>45</sup>"Mormonism and Literature," 211.



# Virginia Sorensen as the Founding Foremother of the Mormon Personal Essay

Eugene England<sup>1</sup>

VIRGINIA SORENSEN IS KNOWN as a prizewinning novelist and in Utah, at least, as a *Mormon* novelist—which is what she usually calls herself. I wish to add to her credits by presenting her as a first-rate Mormon personal essayist, in fact the first Mormon essayist who could be called first-rate and a major influence on those who have followed. Edward Geary's *Goodbye to Poplarhaven* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1985) and Mary Bradford's *Leaving Home* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), together with the anthology, *Personal Voices*, edited by Bradford (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), have been thought of as beginning a new genre in Mormon literature and setting the standard for it. But Sorensen's *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood*<sup>2</sup> published twenty-five years ago is, I believe, the first in that genre and still the best. It and Sorensen's other work directly influenced Bradford and Geary and indirectly formed most of the other Mormon personal essayists whose work is appearing now with increasing regularity.

The exact nature of her achievement and influence are difficult to describe, mainly because we are still developing the concepts and even the words in which to talk about and assess the personal essay itself. Here, I will suggest a few concepts but mainly provide examples that will, I hope, move you to read and enjoy and be challenged by Sorensen's work. This is an essay in appreciation.

*Where Nothing Is Long Ago* is usually thought of as fiction, but these "memories of a Mormon childhood" are surely different in important ways from fiction. The difference, I think, has to do with the kind of truth being sought and achieved by the author and perceived by the reader.

Truth is a strange word to use in relation to fiction, of course. Edgar Allen Poe, seeing rightly that poetry is not the same as truth or duty, wanted to exclude the search for understanding or goodness from poetry; and his ideas were enormously influential on the French Symbolists and in turn on modern American literature and criticism. As a result, we still feel uneasy using words like *truth* or *morality* or *belief* in literature classes. Bruce Jorgensen, in his excellent essay on Sorensen's finest novel, *The Evening and the Morning*, does great service, drawing on the work of Wayne Booth and Sheldon Sachs, in describing the way any coherent work of literary art must control, through a myriad of artistic devices, our feelings about the characters, events, ideas, and choices being represented.<sup>3</sup> Such control is inevitably moral, that is, expressive of value, and it thus inevitably reveals the true shape, however complex, of the author's ethical and intellectual vision.

Various kinds of fictions do this in various ways: a satire, like *Gulliver's Travels*, shows only the author's negative beliefs; a didactic work, like Johnson's *Rasselas* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, reveals long-range life commitments and specific doctrinal beliefs; but a novel, particularly a mature work in the great tradition of moral realism such as *The Evening and the Morning*, though it necessarily reveals more than those other genres of the author's implicit ethical shape of belief, does so through imitating human life in a structure of creative judgments that is complex, subtle, paradoxical, and difficult to reduce to paraphrase or dogma. Indeed a novel interests and moves us because it is able to capture something of the irreducible, tangy contradictions of life and personality.

Jorgensen, with close analysis of the structure of judgments and sympathies made by the narrator of

*The Evening and the Morning*, the implied author who is, of course, a created "second self" of Sorensen, demonstrates that the work "seems distinguishably and distinctly Mormon."<sup>24</sup> This is not because it unambiguously defends Mormon doctrines or moral dogmas but because it is true to more fundamental but complex Mormon commitments. The novel has the clear moral intention to look closely at the truth of "things as they are" and to find truth in opposition—that is, and here I quote Joseph Smith, "by proving contraries."<sup>25</sup>

Kate Alexander, a person based very closely on Sorensen's grandmother, who was also named Kate commits adultery, but she does so in a struggle to find her way out of benighted views of women and of sex that afflict her culture and especially her marriage. In her struggle she seeks both at-one-ment and atonement, reconciliation and punishment, which are themselves in opposition. Jorgensen writes, "Kate lives and moves in a tension between erotic joy and ethical guilt as powerful as any opposition I have seen in Mormon fiction."<sup>26</sup>

Sorensen herself, in a lecture at the 1953 Utah Writers' Conference about the novelist's particular struggle with the question of truth, points out that many writers stand "in the middle"—incapable of severe orthodoxies." This enables more comprehensive and thus truer judgments because the writer can better "balance the importance of the individual . . . with the importance of the great events that wash people into vast groups and crowds." Specifically, for Sorensen, this means a,

*necessity for creating freely, certainly, but something more, the responsibility of preserving some web of significance that men can live by. . . . It demands not only freedom within a tradition, but an ever-widening tolerance for the traditional values of others.*<sup>27</sup>

Like any natural personal essayist, Sorensen gives life and force to her thoughts with an experience. She tells of first going to study the Yaqui Indians of Mexico. (She learned about them while researching the life of the exotic early Mormon, Sam Brannan, who lived among those Indians in his later years.) She left for Mexico right after a famous meteor shower, which she layed on the grass with her family

and watched, taking it as a good omen for her departure. She arrived late at night at a small town in Sonora, having been warned by friends not to travel alone because all Mexican taxi drivers "were dangerous brigands with bristling moustaches." Sure enough, just such a one drives her, in total silence, much farther than she had thought she had to go to her hotel out on the shore of the Gulf:

*When the town appeared and disappeared and still we went one and on, I was certain that I was kidnapped. But then the driver turned his head and asked me a question which I will never forget. He spoke in careful English in a beautiful voice: "Tell me, Senorita, where you came from, did the stars rain?"*

*We were soon friends. I was able to tell him how it was to see the rain of stars where the land is a mile high, and he was able to tell me how it was to see them rain into the sea. I have never again been really afraid of any stranger.*<sup>28</sup>

This clearly expressed sense of vocation by Sorensen provides a way to identify more clearly and appreciate more fully the particular qualities of her personal essays—which, while they delight us, teach us all to be no longer strangers and foreigners.

The myriad judgments of people, acts, choices, etc., which establish a recognizable shape of belief in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, have to do directly with real people, including Sorensen herself. Here the implied author, a mature woman looking back on her childhood self but also reimagining her childhood from the point of view of her younger self, is now more directly part of the subject. Like all her work, her subject is sinners, but these here include herself. She is revealing her present self through the fiction of revealing her past self, but she also is creating herself anew before our eyes and hearts through the power of the recreated truth of real experience in the past. And it seems to make a difference, especially, I think, if we are Mormons or are for whatever reason at all inclined to be sympathetic to her ethical vision. It seems to make a difference in our ethical response if we believe that at least a major part of the experience was really real—that it indeed happened in real time and space to people like us, particularly to the

implied author, whose integrity is being created for us as an authoritative guide in our own pilgrimages. It is not only a true dream, but as Sorensen says in the preface, "a dream dreamed out of memory."

Let me try to illustrate. The first essay, "Where Nothing is Long Ago," has what seems at first, in a work about the past, a misleading title, a reference to poem that calls America such a place, a place where all the history, including the initial struggle to create a civilization, is recent. The narrative gives us Sorensen's mature memory, sparked by a letter from her mother about the death of "Brother Tolsen," a good Saint who had once killed a water-thief with his shovel. The subtle effects of recreated reality, a dream dreamed out of memory, begin immediately as Sorensen recalls the summer she was nine, her morbid interest in the affair, and her general morbidity then that, she tells us, made her,

*absolutely certain for years afterward that two piles of bloody rabbits' ears I saw on the courthouse lawn at the time of Brother Tolsen's trial had something to do with the killing he was being tried for. They hadn't. They were merely tokens of the fact that the annual county rabbit hunt had gone off according to schedule. (4)*

But of course there is a connection, one that Sorensen's mind had intuitively preserved and that now her artistic intuition expresses in this peripheral way, where it niggles at our minds throughout the essay. The connection is reinforced by another seemingly off-hand reference to those ears as they are being counted on the courthouse lawn while the jury is being selected, and again the seemingly irrelevant but jarring comment, "Those piles of ears I see to this day" (13).

Sorensen establishes the range of ethical complexity by dwelling in loving detail on the water of her childhood and revealing its effect on Bishop Peterson, her best friend's father, who was able to leave his lovely Denmark only when certain he was going to the Kingdom of God and who found the mountain water, "so pure, so shining, so cold, so free, . . . an unmistakable sign of the Kingdom" (7). She includes the naive viewpoint of the child, who notices the lonely grief of the murdered man's widow as well as the simple sense of

justice in the town as Brother Tolsen is acquitted and there is no more water-stealing in the valley thereafter. She also includes the reflection of her mature self on how close we still are in the West to a time "when important things were settled violently," how we remember,

*the wide dry wastes before the mountain water was captured and put to use. Even now, the dry spaces, where the jack rabbits hop through the brush as thick as mites on a hen, are always there, waiting to take over. (4)*

And there we have again the un insisted upon, even denied, but irresistible connection of those rabbits' ears to Brother Tolsen. We still retain in the West, even today as well as in 1921, beyond any possible need, a tendency toward casual violence—whether in mass rabbit hunts or deer hunting rituals or acquiescence in justice through deadly force, both local and international, against John Singer and Ghaddafi.

Sorensen reminds us of this, and then she ends her essay with a reversal of roles, the naive child confronting the horror and the mature woman opening her sympathy for, yet determination to write about and thus both expose and understand, her own people's strange but understandable ways:

*One other memory remains. I recall an evening, months after the trial was over, when my parents and I were driving along the road where his fields lay and saw Brother Tolsen working with the little streams that were running among his young corn. Dad and Mother waved and called to him. He lifted an arm to answer, and I saw that he held a shovel in the other hand. "I wonder if he bought a new shovel," I said suddenly.*

*For a minute, the air seemed to have gone dead about us, in the peculiar way it sometimes can, which is so puzzling to a child. Then Mother turned to me angrily. "Don't you ever let me hear you say a thing like that again!" she said. "Brother Tolsen is a good, kind man."*

*So until this very hour I never have. (14)*

Sorensen takes on a number of other, equally difficult, subjects with her complex structure of memory and reflection, of discovered and recreated self, that

reveals the complex shape of her belief and moves us toward correspondingly full and complex judgment and sympathy. My favorite is her essay on polygamy, "The Darling Lady," which is of course not so much about polygamy as about the creation of herself as an empathetic being. It is about the intrinsic costs to people who chose to live that peculiar Principle, about the additional costs imposed on Mormons by the gentiles at the end of polygamy, about the people who, in great faith, bore those costs—and also about our ability to respond to such people. It uses real history, the U.S. government's attack on Mormonism which forced families to separate, and it uses a real person, a second wife who was thus separated and then, when her husband died, was left alone to survive in a two-room store and home near Sorensen's Manti home when the first wife settled the estate.

In "The Darling Lady" Sorensen stays closely in the child's naive point of view, revealing to the reader, through partly overhead, enigmatic conversations, much more than her child self understands, and thus involving us more effectively in the process of change the child experiences. The second wife is called the "darling lady" by Virginia and her sister, Helen, because she uses that word so much when she speaks to them on their shopping trips to the place they call The Corner. She is perceived only as a somewhat strange but occasionally useful functionary, who comes slowly out of her back room when they enter her shop and ring the bell, serves them inefficiently and apologetically, and returns to mysterious nonexistence.

But Virginia, not knowing that her mother is newly pregnant, reports the Darling Lady's conversation with the mother in a way that tells us much about her. She warns the mother not to take a rough trip into the canyon, revealing she knows about the baby. "It's a look on a woman's face; I can always tell," and that she cares in a particular way: "Did you know I lost mine? . . . It was toward the end for me, but they wanted me to go. We went on wagons then. I didn't know any better" (19).

The two sisters awake months later on a January night to the sound of terrible groaning in their parents' bedroom, and there is no response to their calls for Mother and Dad, only a horrible, creeping smell, a new presence in the dark that smells of fear, and

finally they simply lie in the dark "whining in a sad duet":

*Suddenly there was a voice at the window.*

*We both sat up at once, facing the square of snowy dark, and there was a shape, a head, and from where the window stood open to the night came a familiar voice. "It's all right, darlings! She'll be all right soon. Sssh!"*

*We dived together beneath the quilts and lay paralyzed with listening. The Darling Lady. Nothing to fear. And yet we lay tied together in the warm bed, hardly breathing. "You'll worry her if you go on crying. Ssssh . . . Sssh . . . Don't cry." She spoke as one speaks to a crying child on one's lap in a rocking chair, sweetly and softly.*

*We made no more sound. And presently her voice faded away. And then, at last, out of the silence, we heard our door open and Father was there speaking to us in his familiar, hearty voice. (24)*

The girls are delighted with the new baby and "run the neighborhood" with the news but for some reason do not go and tell the Darling Lady. A few weeks later they go to The Corner but find it locked for the first time ever and learn from a neighbor that the Darling Lady had been taken to the hospital with pneumonia. "She was sick for three days before a soul knew," the neighbor laments (26).

The next autumn the girls, chancing by the back side of The Corner, notice that all the windows are broken and look into that back room for the first time:

*There were only a few things, a tumbled bed and three or four chairs overturned. Dishes and odd bits of this and that stood on an open cupboard that had ragged curtains on the doors. . . . [And now Sorensen's point of view moves from the naive child to the comprehending adult.] Dirt was scattered over everything, and mouse toleys, and there was a peculiar smell. Dust and rust and mold. And age, maybe. . . . All the time, then, in that one little room. Waiting for the tinkle of the bell. How slowly she had risen from her chair, answering, how slowly she had always moved. She must have had a terrible lot of time. I felt a hollow open at the pit of my stomach and a heaviness upon my shoulders. To be old. To be alone. Only for a second, though. Not yet. (27)*

That last is a cry from Virginia's own heart, made twenty-five years ago, when she was younger than I am now, and it is a cry whose form and force I think are possible only in a personal essay, not in fiction.

The ending returns to the imaginative forms of fiction, but also to the process of the real creation of Virginia Sorensen's ethical self, the person she now is and wants to be, partly because of what she experienced then and partly because of what she has made of that experience:

*So it was she became a heroine to us, a comfort on many a winter night. Sometimes we lay and pretended that she came again, and we got up and asked her in. We took her in to see the baby, and she sat by the fire, and we brought her a glass of hot milk.*

*"I wish we had," Helen said.*

*We pretended that she sat there rocking and sipping and getting her feet dry, with her slippers by the stove. "Well, darlings, this is nice," she always said. (28)*

In "The Apostate" Sorensen remembers her grandmother, Kate Alexander, whose fictional adultery is the subject of *The Evening and the Morning*. The apostasy is real and just as ethically complex as the adultery. Sorensen tells us of being sent wonderful packages of fruit in winter from Kate, who lived in California, some pomegranates accompanied by a letter that exults in their special sensual beauty:

*Sometimes I cut them little, before they're ripe, just to see the lovely pattern of the seeds inside. When they are still white and transparent they look like a cup of pearls, as beautifully arranged as a honeycomb. When they are ripe they are brilliant red and shine like rubies. . . .*

*"Do you remember the verses about pomegranates in the Song of Solomon? After I came in from picking these, I looked up the Song in my Bible. Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth." (39)*

The letter promises a visit and Sorensen prepares us by reviewing how she had been baptized along with her dearly loved friend, Carol, with the encouragement of her own non-Mormon mother, who said

to her jack-Mormon father, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." She tells how she had learned in Religion Class to love Mormon history, "as bloody and exciting as the story of the early Christians" (44) and to despise the apostates who had betrayed Joseph Smith. When Kate refers to herself in another letter as "a wicked old apostate," Virginia cannot accept her mother's rationalization that Kate had a hard life growing up the daughter of a second wife in polygamy, with too many children and hard times, with her father often in hiding. She can only bring herself, when the visit comes, to follow her teacher's admonition to "teach by our own example" and to pray earnestly "that my dear grandmother might see the light" (50).

Many years later, Virginia attends, with her mother, her grandmother's last illness and learns much more. She looks at marks and notes in the margins of Kate's books, a passage on Buddhism that claims Christians have no real understanding of women: "They love the souls of women, not their bodies, not how they are different from men but how they are the same." She sees the passages underlined in Mills's "On Liberty" and notes especially a passage marked in Hendrick Van Loon's *The Story of the Bible* on the Song of Solomon:

*"The Song of Songs is in reality a very old love poem. . . . The heroine is a shepherdess [who] is taken away from her home in the village [and] installed in a lovely apartment in the heart of the royal palace. But she thinks only of the happy days when she and her own man wandered across the hills and tended their flocks. . . . [The poem] is the first evidence of something new and very fine which had at last come into the world. . . . Woman is coming into her own. She is recognized as the equal of man. She is his companion. She inspires his love and she receives it. Upon this firm foundation of mutual respect and affection a new world was soon to be built." (54)*

In the margin Kate had written, "But we are no better than the Negroes; we have not got the Priesthood."

My title for this essay referred to Virginia as the foremother of us personal essayists. I chose that word for accuracy and also to emphasize my conviction that the voice that is now appearing in the finest Mormon

personal essays can best be called a feminine voice. It is receptive, circular, vulnerable, daring, ethically complex, and sympathetic but strong with integrity, rather than logical, straightforward, safe, ethically simple and judgmental, or expedient and authoritative. Using as merely descriptive the cultural conventions we have inherited, this means it is "feminine" rather than masculine. This is a voice Virginia seems to have developed partly in response to her precociously feminist grandmother—or at least in the re-creation of that woman and of her self in the process.

The shape of Sorensen's re-created self emerges in powerful complexity at the end of her essay on her grandmother. First we learn the details of Kate's free-thinking apostasy and the probable effects on her eleven children, none of whom had been baptized and nearly all of whom had scattered out of Zion. Then we see the only one who had not scattered, Virginia's mother, complaining because it is so hard to bathe Kate, during that last illness, with her garments on:

*"You don't believe in all that, Mother! You've said so ever since I can remember. So why—"*  
*As I entered the room, Grandmother pulled herself onto her elbows. Her voice was strong from her frail body, ravaged with illness. "I made a promise, that's why," she said. "And when I make a promise, I keep it!"* (56)

And she not only wears her garments but is buried in her temple clothes.

Virginia, asked to read at the funeral, has no trouble finding marked passages Kate loved:

*"Judge not and ye shall not be judged . . . forgive and ye shall be forgiven . . . bless them that curse you . . . for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust . . . when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. . . . But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father, which is in secret. . . ."* (56)

That is, I believe, the best didactic formulation that could be found of the complex shape of Sorensen's beliefs. It is also, probably, the best for a Mormon, for a Christian, for any human. But it was not enough for a Mormon personal essayist like Virginia Sorensen, who was working with real experience and with the imaginative echoes that flesh out and give life to our formulations and who therefore had to add one more paragraph:

*"Perhaps some thought it strange that there should be at the very end, Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth. . . ."* (57)

Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps there is really no great difference between good fiction and good personal essays. It only remains then, perhaps, to consider if these essays, or stories, in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* need or ought to be called Mormon. I think so. Sorensen reaches her human ethical universals through particulars grounded in her Mormon past and identity. She reveals us, including her own childhood self who was one of us, at our worst but presents us often as better than we are and shows herself, one of us, becoming better than she was. In general she seems engaged in a defense of the faith and the Saints. She said once in my hearing, "How could I be anything else [but a Mormon writer]? When we write of the things we know and love best, we cannot but be defending it to the world." She was the first and is still the unsurpassed master in the difficult and not fully understood genre of the Mormon personal essay, which combines the features and strengths of didactic truth-telling and fictional truth-creation. She achieves the ideal, well-formulated for any work of literature by her mentor at Stanford, Yvor Winters:

*[It] makes a defensible rational statement about a given human experience (the experience need not be real but must be in some sense possible) and at the same time communicates the emotion which ought to be motivated by that rational understanding of that experience.<sup>9</sup>*

I first gave an early version of this paper in the fall of 1988, with Virginia Sorensen sitting four feet

in front of me—a rather daunting experience. It became worse when she rose at the end of the hour, fixed me with her clear eyes and, with only a slight smile, told me that it was hard for her to accept my allegations of literal truth-telling and designation of her as an essayist rather than fictionist. She offered as a major reason that she had entirely made up the account, in "The Vision of Uncle Lars" in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, of her great-aunt's return to Denmark with her husband to stand with him at the spot where he had a vision of her when he was there on his mission. It was, she said, simply a fiction needed to complete the story with proper emotional force. I was taken aback and too tongue-tied to respond. But I saw her later at a reception and asked, "Did you believe the vision really happen?" She said yes. I asked, "Though it doesn't matter whether the return to Denmark really happened, does it matter, to the nature and quality of your 'story,' whether the vision did?" She thought a while and said, "Yes. It *does* matter. I see what you mean."

I believe it matters to the quality and effect of the personal essay that it be about things that really happened or, in Winters's words, could have happened—but only about such things that it matters whether they *can* happen or not, such as visions, such as certain kinds of moral and spiritual experience. I believe that it makes a difference whether Virginia Sorensen believes that such visions are possible and that readers are affected differently whether they take her as a witness to such things—that is, as a personal essayist, or as a witness only to certain moral and emotional insights, a fictionist. But she is a great personal essayist, the founding foremother of the best Mormon personal essays, because she is not only a witness but a skilled fictionist who creates the emotion proper to the experiences she is a witness for.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Eugene England is a professor of English at Brigham Young University and called together in 1976 the group that organized the Association for Mormon Letters. This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, in January 1989 at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

<sup>2</sup>*Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963). Quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>3</sup>"Herself Moving Beside Herself, Out There Alone": The Shape of Mormon Belief in Virginia Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 43-61.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951 printing), 6:428.

<sup>6</sup>"Herself Moving Beside Herself, Out There Alone," 54.

<sup>7</sup>"Is It True?—The Novelist and His [sic] Materials," *Western Humanities Review* 7 (1952): 285, 289.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>9</sup>*In Defense of Reason* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1947), 19.

# The Strengths and Weaknesses of Virginia Sorensen's *On This Star*

Linda Berlin<sup>1</sup>

IN *ON THIS STAR*, Virginia Sorensen is at both her best and worst. In fact, her worst often stems from her best. For instance, Sorensen's successes come from her ability to paint an authentic portrait of a peculiar Mormon culture and to develop the private, personal drama. She also creates tension by developing characters who struggle within that culture and within themselves to discover meaning and to assert and maintain identity. Although Sorensen produces an intriguing plot, a potentially powerful theme, and sympathetic, interesting characters, she, nonetheless, finally exploits the impact of *On This Star* by manipulating her characters and plot. The effect is contrived and melodramatic.

The general falling-off in *On This Star* contrasts sharply with Sorensen's continued success in her essay collection *Where Nothing is Long Ago*. Here Sorensen triumphs in her probing depiction of the individual within the group. Moreover, she offers the reader a sense of genuine longing and bitter-sweet nostalgia for familial, cultural, and theological roots—roots painfully incapable of producing adequate sustenance for the characters. Sorensen works with this same theme in *On This Star* and at times succeeds brilliantly by revealing the complex, conflicting emotions with which her hero Erik Eriksen battles as he attempts to sever himself from his heritage. However, she exposes merely a cultural battle and ignores completely the conflict that a character would certainly face when breaking away from a heritage based on a theological foundation. In addition, her portrayal of the Mormon culture seems periodically narrow and unbalanced.

The novel is set in the 1920s in Manti (she calls it Templeton), a microcosmic chunk of cultural Mor-

monism, still isolated and undefiled by gentile influence. Sorensen gives a brief history of the settlement of the now-thriving rural town, built up by hardy Danish immigrants under the direction of Brigham Young. Among those first settlers was Lars Eriksen, whose sons have become the most prominent and prosperous inhabitants of the valley.

The Eriksen brothers—all sons of Lars's first wife, the ever-efficient, robust Christine—represent mainstream cultural Mormonism. They, like their faith, are independent of the outside world, are constant, loyal, and efficient.

*Between these men was the whole quietude of a firm relationship. They were agreed upon the quality of life. Behind them were the rich associations of a close-knit family, of many boys and girls living together, quarreling sometimes, but also sharing, maintaining fierce individualities and fiercer loyalties.<sup>2</sup>*

The cohesive bond that cements them reflects what also, according to Sorensen, cements the whole of Mormon society: a history, a heritage and a common goal. Because of that heritage,

*these people had never split apart and lived isolated from each other, as many pioneers had done in other places. Long before they came to the mountains they had learned to live close together and to work alongside each other; terroristic burnings and lootings in Missouri and Illinois and Iowa had taught them the folly of personal isolation, and they were not to forget this lesson nor let their children and grandchildren forget it. . . . The whole community rolled up cabins of logs and quarried stone to build gathering places. A man's log chain belonged to his neighbors, as his strength belonged to them. (13)*



In this passage, Sorensen illustrates well the powerful ties that knit Mormon society into a cohesive, cooperative unit.

The novel's conflict evolves when Erik [or Eric, Linda?] Eriksen, Lars's dissident son by a second polygamous marriage, has an affair with Chel Bowen, the fiancée of his half-brother Jens. The conflict is derived not so much from the affair as from Erik's attempt to come to terms with those strong cultural roots and to maintain his individuality and independence.

Although Erik, a progressive thinker and talented musician, resents the strangulating conformity of the valley among his people, he senses more consciously and even more passionately than his faithful brothers the wholesomeness and virtue of his heritage. He recognizes the security in belonging and in accepting already established "official" truths. In fact, he concedes that:

*The teaching was not always backward looking. It taught a faith that turned streams and planted gardens and reaped fruit and flowers. There was a surging pattern to the belief which followed life from the cradle to the grave. And then beyond, without pausing to take a breath, to name the very aspects of heaven. . . . The lashing tight to particular place and people, to the very setting, was the uncommon thing. The pleas to the children, the youth of Zion, and the promises. (26)*

Yet Erik no longer can accept those promises; and although "he always felt a rightness within himself, a sort of stay against loneliness [when] on the [organ] stool and feeling the keys and hearing the singing behind him," he cannot stay in Zion. "He would go away in September and would suffer the old splitting all over again, a coming apart within himself that nothing seemed to heal entirely" (22). Here, Sorensen skillfully captures the painful, ambivalent feelings involved in growing out of a culture.

Although Erik craves something about the valley that is "so familiar, so changeless, so incredibly sweet," he ultimately rejects his family's feeling that it is a "fit home for the people of God" and considers it an "incredible egotism, fostered by the mountains and hemmed in by the valleys" (25). Erik refuses to sacri-

fice his integrity for security. The two seem irreconcilable. Consequently, the "sweetness" of the valley is for him tainted by a pressure to fit into the pattern. And, although Erik speaks fondly of the changelessness of the Mormon pattern, he argues against it in a discussion with Jens: People "shouldn't be told anything so definite they can't get it out of their systems. . . . There are some the pattern doesn't fit." Another half-brother, Ivor Eriksen, who represents a kind of orthodoxy, counters, "Then it's because they pull out of the pattern" (31). Because of the narrowness of thought represented by Ivor's statement, Erik has abandoned his cultural heritage.

Just as Sorensen deals masterfully with the feelings of pain, excitement, bitterness, and alienation inherent in Erik's battle for liberating individuality, she also illuminates his reasons for and, in fact, the necessity of breaking with his heritage. In a scene where Chel, Erik, and Erik's past music teacher Seenie visit the miller and part-time violinist Mr. Block, Sorensen reinforces her theme through well-chosen imagery and symbolism. Carved wooden dancers on a music box come to represent the conformist believers and the nonconformist expatriates. As the toy figures swirl dangerously close to the edge of the platform, Chel exclaims, "Why do certain ones turn in one place and others keep coming to the edge like that?" Mr. Block responds, "It must be the way they are made. . . . They respond in different ways to the vibrations" (59). Erik is one who responds differently to the vibrations.

Erik functions as a medium for Sorensen's commentary on Mormon society and culture. However, because of Erik's passion and bitterness, this commentary often loses objectivity; consequently, Sorensen fails to maintain that delicate balance which produces verisimilitude. Her depiction of "the true believers" is stock and often simplistic. None of her orthodox Mormons is interested in the arts—except for Chel who straddles the fence of belief. The faithful are intolerant of change and any deviation from the norm. Furthermore, they are blissful in their naivete and ignorance. Sorensen also implicitly suggests that those still adhering to the faith have never questioned its validity and have, therefore, never lived.

In contrast, Chel, who seems almost to have lived in a sterile vacuum all her life, because of Erik's influence suddenly begins to ponder ideas that most fourteen-year-olds have come to terms with. Chel is, nevertheless, "curiously excited" and "thrilled with panic" by these strange new ideas Erik has introduced to her. She also notices how, like the rest of the valley's population, "she never did this, never did that" (50). Even at age eighteen, before meeting Erik, "she had never known guilt before, or fear or discovery" (102).

Before Erik brought the ideas from the external world, Chel, who represents her society, had been dead emotionally and intellectually. Although Chel has lived her entire life in the shelter and conformity of the valley, it seems incredible that she, who is depicted as bright and curious, has actually never really thought about or felt anything.

In addition to Sorensen's portrayal of Mormon society as narrow and flat, she depicts Mormons on the whole as materialistic and utilitarian. The Eriksens perform their religious duties in faithful expectations of temporal blessings. And, indeed, these men are evidence that the Lord bestows temporal blessings on the faithful. Each has a thriving business, spacious home, and an uncommonly handsome and naturally more-than-willing wife. One scene explicitly indicts Mormons for their unabashed materialism. Erik attends a fast and testimony meeting where one,

*young man who sold insurance stood up and bore his testimony to the fact that when he started to pay his tithing his volume of business increased fifty percent in a few months, more than compensating him for doing his duty before God. "Paying an honest tithe is good business!" was his testimony, and it had more than an ordinary fervency. (28)*

No one in Templeton seems to perform his or her duty to God out of simple love and a desire to serve the Lord. Moreover, Erik seems to be the only one championing traditional Christian ethics. This seems to me to be an unfair and inaccurate portrayal.

This apparently lopsided picture of Mormons as a group is not, however, as damaging to the novel as Sorensen's much more subtle slighting of the impact of Mormon theology on the culture she depicts. She

deals with Mormonism on a purely cultural level, ignoring the theology and the vision that produced that culture. Erik ponders how,

*[Mormonism] could be at once as true as work and as fabulous as fairyland? . . . One went away, and out of sight of the fields and the temple, the fable turned into a ridiculous fantasy. One came back and walked strongly on the true and substantial land. (26)*

Again, the religion is derived from the land, the wholesome work, and "the hard-headed cooperation" (26).

Erik meditates further that "Truth. Right. Sin. Here, one could give them singular meanings. But they did not have singular meanings after all. This he knew" (26). Certainly Erik is disillusioned with Mormonism, for he does not, beyond its cultural ramifications, understand it.

Also, Chel, who is steeped in Mormonism, is likewise ignorant of its powerful theology. After Erik makes love to her and suggests that they leave immediately for the East to get married, she distractedly comments that there are no temples there. She has no real concept of what the temple signifies, of its eternal and theological implications. Furthermore, she does not comprehend the nature of her sin and how to repent of it. Instead, she ignores the teachings of her faith concerning the redemptive power of Christ's atonement and attempts to blot out her sexual sin, compounded by concealing it from Jens and marrying him in the temple, by thereafter immersing herself in a ritualistic pattern of housewifely duties. This response is not in and of itself a flaw in the novel. In fact, Chel's reaction to her sin might have worked very well if Sorensen had contrasted that response with established theology or developed Chel's eccentric behavior as a reaction to it. However, Sorensen robs her character of plausibility by robbing Mormonism of its theology.

Just as Erik and Chel understand only the cultural aspects of Mormonism, Sorensen also either ignores or does not understand the importance and impact of Mormon theology. She depicts a fairly revealing and detailed segment of the temple ceremony as Chel marries Jens. Although Sorensen is respectful

in her nostalgic glimpse of the ceremony, she fails to clarify the real importance this ceremony has for most of her characters. Lines such as "no one seemed aware of the comic-tragic aspects of the masquerade which left reality deliberately behind and melted living into a satisfying dream" (161) are evidence of her lack of awareness that this "dream" is much more than that to some of her characters. Sorensen's failure to explore the very real nature and significance of Mormon theology in connection with her characters damages the credibility of those characters and the novel as a whole.

In addition, Sorensen undercuts the power of her intriguing plot by manipulating situation and characters to tie the novel into a neat, little knot. She concludes the novel in unfortunate melodrama and contrived analogy. *On This Star* sustains credibility until Erik leaves for the East, expecting Chel to follow later alone. He attempts to dispel her anxiety by assuring, "We must grow out of childhood alone" (181). But because Chel resolves not to follow, she must still, in a sense, grow up alone. As long as she cleaves to her heritage, she is unable to expand.

Instead, she marries Jens and absorbs herself in a kind of meticulous house-keeping penance. Also, through her routine she tries to extinguish her ever-smoldering passion for Erik. Finally, Erik returns to attend to his ill mother. During his visit, the Eriksen brothers arrange a hunting trip and Erik, who detests killing, is invited to come. In an uncharacteristic response he consents to go, a manipulated device of the plot to bring Jens and Erik together on the mountain with loaded rifles.

Meanwhile, Chel, frenzied at Erik's arrival, forgets to prepare Jens's hunting equipment, and he is forced to leave without his red hunting jacket. Predictably, Erik, thinking he is aiming at a deer bounding through the brush, shoots and kills Jens. We are never sure whether the shooting is accidental or not, and neither is Erik.

Although Jens has remained ignorant throughout the story of Erik's and Chel's relationship, Ivor, who represents orthodoxy and justice, is very aware of the affair and threatens to kill Erik if he comes near Chel. When Chel receives the news about Jens, she immediately remembers his forgotten jacket and

claims, giving Erik "a look he could not comprehend, 'It was my fault'" (255). Chel then forms a perverse theological view that establishes God as a puppeteer who has plotted everything and used her as an instrument to contrive ultimate happiness for all of them. Jens is working on the "other side," and Erik and she can finally be together in this life, as was meant to be.

At the end of the novel, Chel and Erik meet in the woods where she explains this childish, fatalistic summation of their lives. Erik futilely attempts to explain that life doesn't come in those kinds of neat little packages, but Chel will not be dissuaded. Finally, they part, Chel believing in God's manipulative benevolence and Erik believing in nothing at all. He is resigned to the fact that he must leave Chel forever, assuring himself that "she'll be all right" in her valley with her simplistic beliefs (275). However, justice or vengeance in the form of Ivor has followed Erik and Chel and witnessed their brief embrace.

As Erik lights a cigarette, an earlier symbol of his defiance of the Mormon code, "he heard a sudden motion behind him from the trees along the path, and the burning circle was crushed out on his cheek as he fell upon his face" (275). Orthodoxy ultimately defeats the individual, triumphing over nonconformity. Chel is tragically left to grow out of childhood alone, as Erik once explained she must.

Although this contrived conclusion and the implausible, inconsistent character responses mar the novel, Sorensen accomplishes many things that make the novel worth reading. As in her essay of childhood, *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, her ability to reveal complex, intense emotions and to explore human nature, and to do so with brilliantly styled language and imagery, help compensate for other lapses in *On This Star*.

As Chel and Erik begin to recognize their feelings for each other, Sorensen captures those emotions authentically by detailing the small but significant events that multiply to form relationships. When Chel asks if Erik has fallen in love with many women, he replies, "Of course." Sorensen then reproduces one of those awkward, exciting moments that pass between all new lovers:

*Out of the odd silence this created in her, he spoke of something else. But they both felt something between them, a kind of thickening of atmosphere which weighted both their remarks—a charged and heavy air. (65)*

As in this scene, Sorensen is often best at developing relationships between characters by what they don't say rather than by what they do say. In contrast to the tense excitement Sorensen creates between Chel and Erik, she gives us another "pregnant pause" between Chel and her sister Esther where the emotions are markedly different:

*She looked at her sister, an expression on her face that was different lately, the relaxed, almost drooping look of a woman who is carrying a child. There was a heaviness of cheek, a peculiar depth of eye. Silences, full and satisfying, fell between them as they sewed. (77)*

In these few lines Sorensen establishes the sense of love, security, and acceptance these two women share in their relationship. Through this kind of minimalization, Sorensen produces a heightened sense of intensity.

Sorensen also accurately and perceptively explores human nature. When characters are not being manipulated to conform to the designs of her plot, their actions and responses are believable and persuasive. For instance, the following scene where a passing car has interrupted Chel's and Erik's passion exemplifies Sorensen's ability to record human nature accurately and insightfully:

*He sat up, watching her. She went to the fire and began to clear away the makings of breakfast. Her hands were awkward, as though they were unused to simple things like wiping grease from a skillet. She took the two plates and the forks and Erik's cup and walked to the river and rinsed them. He knew she was hiding from him, among the work. She also knew it. (92)*

Later, Chel again hides from Erik, "among the work," this time fastidiously keeping Jens's house.

Sorensen's best and most believable characters are the novel's minor characters, probably because they do not need to be molded to further the progression

of the story line. Conversely, they evolve naturally and effectively. Sorensen reveals true personalities through her minor characters, as she does so masterfully in *Where Nothing is Long Ago*.

Erik's music teacher Seenie is the novel's most successful and convincing character. She is also Sorensen's most sympathetic and tragic character. Because Seenie is merely competent, Erik soon outgrows her musical instruction and goes East for training. Seenie's tragedy is not simply that she is inadequate but that she recognizes greatness and knows that she will never possess it. She has no means of fulfillment in life other than her music, and she senses deeply her inadequacy in that, too. The one opportunity she had to share herself completely was aborted when her lover was killed. She died, according to Erik, with him.

When Erik willingly and gratefully receives what she offers and when he produces something she is incapable of producing, she extends herself through him and harbors a pathetic passion for him that she knows can never be realized. Her passive, unrequited affection for him appears even more pathetic in comparison to the passionate mutuality between Chel and Erik.

As Chel and Erik begin a vital, electrically charged conversation, "Seenie started down the long aisle, looking futile and small like a late butterfly when the flowers are gone" (16). Sorensen uses this particularly apt description to show that, like a late butterfly with all the flowers gone, Seenie senses that she has no practical purpose for existing. She fulfills no one, and no one fulfills her.

The waste of Seenie's pathetic existence is most poignantly portrayed as Erik arranges the annual recital at which Seenie customarily plays just before Erik performs the finale. However, that year Erik puts Chel's number next to his and Seenie's before Chel's. She accepts the demotion with dignity and graciousness, consoled that her Bach number is too heavy to be so near the finale. She then works feverishly on her piece, perfecting a difficult crescendo.

Seenie also frets about whether a rose dress would be too "young" to wear at the performance. Deceiving herself that her decision matters, she stands in front of the mirror at the dress shop. "Her eyes were wide with expectancy for a moment and then, star-

ing, they became vague as if she did not look at what lay before her but at something beyond, deeper in the glass than her reflection" (136). Nevertheless, envisioning Erik, she thinks, "It's what people have in common, after all, isn't it? the spirit, really," and she purchases the dress. (136)

At the recital where all the valley has gathered, Seenie performs her piece well, mastering the crescendo. Yet when the recital is over, in the midst of animated praise being showered upon Chel and Erik, Erik fails to speak the appreciative word to Seenie that she so pitifully craves. Here, Sorensen crafts what I believe is the best moment in the novel. She avoids the sentimental through carefully selected, understated language.

*And Seenie stood apart like something washed casually ashore along a stream. Erik seemed suddenly in a hurry. But he had already spoken to her, hadn't he? Splendid, Seenie. You really did get that crescendo. "The black would have been better," she thought. "For Bach, black would have been better." (147)*

Lines like these, containing vivid images coupled with restrained emotion, are what Sorensen does most masterfully. She knows people and knows their pain and their joy in those small, private moments. When she attempts to produce something more epic or dramatic, she destroys the novel's drama by losing touch with her characters, her theme, and her audience. In fact, those melodramatic moments, along with her failure to fully explore the impact of Mormonism, unfortunately blemish an otherwise powerful story. Nevertheless, because Sorensen provides us with brilliant glimpses of complex human nature and because she often does so deftly with well-crafted language, the novel succeeds on a more molecular level. In *On This Star*, she triumphs in doing what she does best in *Where Nothing is Long Ago*: a portrait of the human experience. Although Sorensen is fairly bad when she is bad, when she is good, she is very good.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Virginia Sorensen, *On This Star* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946), 34. Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

# Joseph and His Brothers: Rivalry in Virginia Sorensen's *On This Star*

Edward A. Geary<sup>1</sup>

*In the birth of desire, the third person is always present.*

—Rene Girard<sup>2</sup>

ABOUT A DOZEN YEARS AGO, when I first undertook a systematic reading of Virginia Sorensen, I rated *On This Star* as the last satisfying of her Mormon regional novels. I was put off by the melodramatic ending and by what seemed to me then to be insufficiently developed characters—especially Chelnicia Bowen, who is presented at the beginning of the novel as an engaging protagonist but who pales almost to insignificance by the end. But I have found it, in the years that followed, to be the Sorensen novel that stays with me the most insistently, whose human situations and local color remain most vividly in my memory, even more than those of *The Evening and the Morning*, which is a much more shapely and fully realized novel. The feeling that I have not fully come to terms with *On This Star* has brought me back to it once again—not in any sense to pronounce the final word, but to meditate on some of the elements that continue to ferment in my imagination.

In her 1953 essay “Is It True?—The Novelist and His Materials” (obviously written in a period when nobody worried much about sexist language), Virginia Sorensen laments the plight of the novelist trying to make Mormon materials intelligible to a wider audience:

*Whenever you write about a “peculiar people” you will find yourself under the necessity of holding up the action of your stories, in a way most frowned-upon by the technicians, while you explain how your characters feel about heaven and hell, and why; how they are married and to how many different*

*people and how this happened to happen; how they feel about food and drink; how many of their relationships are complicated, or sometimes enhanced, by the notion that they go on and on forever.<sup>3</sup>*

Then she goes on to suggest some of the advantages presented by this very peculiarity, alluding to the complicated relationships of polygamous families:

*Certainly, for example, it is true that jealousy has a different quality when it is directed at legitimate and not at illegitimate rival-lovers. This is one problem, at least, which is really peculiar to our own people, yet it adds many new possibilities to the customary simple triangular love stories that everybody else has to tell over and over: we have hexagons!<sup>4</sup>*

Sorensen treats “hexagonal” love stories most extensively in *A Little Lower Than the Angels* and *Many Heavens*, but the complications of polygamous family life play a part in the background of her other Mormon regional novels, including *On This Star*, which is set a generation after the Manifesto. Mormon polygamy was defended by nineteenth-century apologists on the grounds of Old Testament precedents, and Sorensen has taken advantage of this model by creating an updated version of an Old Testament family.

The founder of the Tribe of Eriksen was Lars, who joined the Mormon Church as an idealistic young man in Denmark, attracted largely by its vision of a just and egalitarian society. He emigrated to Zion and was sent by Brigham Young to help colonize “Temple Valley” (obviously modeled on Sanpete Valley), where he entered the United Order and labored to build up the community. He married the prolific Christine (of Danish peasant stock, in contrast to Lars’s educated middle-class background), who bore him twelve

strong, blond children. With the end of the United Order, Lars adapted to the more individualistic ethic but preserved the spirit of cooperation in his own family, with the result that they have prospered beyond their neighbors. Lars's standing in the community made it obligatory that he take a second wife, the self-effacing Ida, by whom he had a daughter and a son, Erik, the novel's protagonist.

At the novel's opening, in 1926, Lars has been dead for several years, but both of his widows survive as do all of his children except for two sons killed in the First World War. The eldest son, Lars II, is a big sheepman with interests in a woolen mill; Ivor specializes in poultry, Nute in hogs, and Oley in fruit. The youngest son, Jens, has studied at the agricultural college and is preparing to establish the first modern dairy in the valley. They have built their holdings by a combination of specialization and cooperation, buying up the land of less successful farmers and helping one another with harvest, building homes, even bottling fruit. Though they have spread up and down the valley, the center of the family remains the big house where Christine presides in matriarchal glory. The entire family gather there for an annual reunion and photographic session during the county fair and also frequently for Sunday dinners, at the end of which each of Christine's children goes through the ritual of kissing their mother and saying "Thank you for food" in Danish. In a wonderful symbolic touch, Christine keeps the family's prize bull in her corral,

*saying it was handier for the boys to bring their heifers here than to any other of the family establishments. And it seemed curiously fitting to her that the boys should still come to the source of their own lives for the seeding of their herds.<sup>5</sup>*

On these family occasions, Ida dutifully comes from her little house on the next block to Christine's big house. Her son, Erik, also comes, when he is in town, but he seethes with resentment. Erik, alone of all the family, has left both the valley and the faith, and spends the greater part of the year pursuing a musical career in the East. However, he comes back to the valley each summer to visit his mother, climb the mountains and fish the creeks, and pick up a little

income by giving music lessons. As the only son of the second wife, Erik has always felt himself to be in competition with his half-brothers:

*As Erik grew up, he was small and lean and dark against the blond stature of the other Eriksen boys. So he was always Little Erik to the family. He had forced himself to excel in ways Christine's boys could never excel, outstripping them in school work, in public speaking, especially in music. But they took turns at getting him down, at washing his face with snow in winter, and out-fishing and out-hunting him in summer. All this was done with the same careless and boisterous affection with which they pronounced the "little" before his name. (11)*

This competition was intensified by the favoritism shown for Erik by his father, who "sometimes frankly referred to him as "The Joseph" and regularly took him along on his trips to Salt Lake, "especially when there was a concert or a play in Salt Lake Theater." Thus the explicit parallel with the House of Israel is established at the outset. Apart from her prolific mothering, there is no reason to think that Christine is a Leah figure, nor even less that Ida is a Rachel. Lars's strongest bond was evidently with his first wife, and there is no suggestion of anything more than a dutiful regard for Ida. But Erik fits the Joseph role not only in having been his father's favorite, but also in having been "sold" (albeit willingly) into Egypt—or Babylon—while his brothers claimed an inheritance in the Promised Land:

*When Erik wished to study music, Lars was pleased. . . . There was controversy in the family over the expense of it. "All right," Lars said to his family, speaking in his mild voice, careful with his English, "there is land and there is money. Erik would rather have lessons than land." (11-12)*

There are also suggestive parallels in the novel with other Old Testament family rivalries. Erik is the rebellious Cain who kills the faithful Abel. Erik is only a few weeks older than Jens; though born of different mothers, they are virtually twins in age. But like Jacob and Esau they are "as different as night and day" (8). Jens is blond, big-muscled, outgoing; Erik is dark and

fine-featured and brooding, "his body like stretched elastic" (16). Erik recalls their childhood relationship in these terms:

*Jens and I were rivals in a strange way. Being the two last boys and about the same age, I always had to shoulder up and pretend to be as big and strong as he was. I remember once when he took a ball away from me. I ran after him, and I still remember how awful it was that I couldn't catch him. I used to dream about chasing people and not being able to catch them. This time, though, he fell down. He stumbled over something. And when I got to him he had turned over and was kicking. He landed one in my stomach, and I keeled over. When I came to, I thought I was still fighting him; I could hear him yelling and thought I had him for sure. I was so glad I felt like bursting wide open—and then I saw that Father had him over his knee. (71)*

Like Jacob and Esau, too, they are rivals for a birthright, though Erik sees it as an intellectual heritage while Jens sees it as religious and economic. Both of them have made pilgrimages back to Denmark, Jens to study the dairy industry, Erik to seek out educated and artistic relatives and learn more about Grundtvig's social idealism, which had influenced his father.

The central plot complication in the novel, Erik's falling in love with Jens's fiancée, and she with him, seems on a first reading to be something straight out of a popular romance: an unsought but overwhelming passion against which both of them are helpless. Upon a closer scrutiny, however, I have come to see it as virtually a textbook example of what René Girard calls "internal mediated desire." Despite all his efforts at self-knowledge, Erik is what Girard calls a *vaniteux*, one who "cannot draw his desires from his own resources; he must borrow them from others."<sup>6</sup> Girard writes:

*A vaniteux will desire any object so long as he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires. The mediator here is a rival, brought into existence as a rival by vanity, and that same vanity demands his defeat.*

Girard continues:

*Only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred. The person who hates first hates himself for the secret admiration concealed by his hatred. In an effort to hide this desperate admiration from others, and from himself, he no longer wants to see in his mediator anything but an obstacle. The secondary role of the mediator thus becomes primary, concealing his original function of a model scrupulously imitated.<sup>7</sup>*

This seems to me a very exact account of Erik's complex attitude toward Jens.

Rivalry and imitative desire are involved in Erik's feelings for Chel from the very outset. Although she has long admired him, he has been entirely unconscious of her existence until he meets her as Jens's fiancée, after having offered to give her some music lessons as a wedding present. Even after the first lesson, Erik is not especially drawn to her until he actually sees her on Jens's arm. His feelings are described in a remarkable passage that clearly demonstrates Girard's claim, "In the birth of desire, the third person is always present":<sup>8</sup>

*Erik was to remember that moment afterward, its whole substance—for it seemed to have a substance of its own, a beginning and an end. It was in a frame within him, like a picture, a moment abstracted from time and perpetuated. Jens took Chel's arm as though to help her over the ditch, an ancient courtesy even when there was a good wide bridge, as here. Something personal and proprietary in the gesture stopped Erik's heart. Jens was magnificent, beautiful in his jeans and his open shirt, and the lovely girl was his own, his right—woman-kind with her hand lifted and laid in the palm of strength. . . .*

*It was not thought so much as a surge of feeling, if the two are ever in any degree apart. It was the sight of the whole with the symbol behind it—Jens and all the rest of the big Eriksen boys and their pretty selected wives. As they selected their cows and their fields and the properly seasoned lumber for their gigantic barns, the Eriksen boys chose their women. (19-20)*



Note that it is *Jens*, not Chel, who first impresses Erik. He admires Jens as a possessor, and Chel at first is simply a generic possession: "womankind with her hand lifted and laid in the palm of strength." It is Jens's "personal and proprietary" gesture that stirs Erik's envy, which then broadens to encompass the entire rival-family, "the big Eriksen boys and their pretty selected wives"—with Erik excluded from the possession of women as he is excluded from the possession of size and strength and land and barns. Only when Erik's imitative desire has been fully aroused does it focus on Chel for her unique value, and even then it is not the value of a person but of a prized object, a work of art. Erik is not attracted to Chel *in spite of* her being his brother's fiancée but *because of* it. In Girard's terms, "The mediator's prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object."<sup>9</sup>

The narrator declares, "They had not meant to fall in love" (61), but in fact Erik engages in a subtle courtship from this moment on. This is not to say he pursues Chel solely or consciously out of malice. He is profoundly lonely and desperately in need of someone who would also know what it means to belong to the Mormon community of faith and to leave it, someone "who had shared the struggle and outlived it" (241). But Girard links this kind of alienation also with imitative desire: "Romantic revulsion, hatred of society, nostalgia for the desert . . . usually conceal a morbid concern for the Other."<sup>10</sup>

Hoping to clinch his victory, Erik seduces Chel on his last night before leaving for the East, thinking that she will now be unable to marry Jens and will have to follow him to New York. She does feel physically and emotionally bonded to Erik, but this is not enough to overcome her fear of leaving the valley and her horror at Erik's rejection of Mormon values. She conceals her sexual indiscretion and goes through a temple marriage with Jens, only to become a frigid, barren, and fanatically dutiful wife.

Girard makes a distinction between what are termed, in English translation, "romantic" and "novelistic" works. Romantic literature presents imitative desire without revealing "its actual mechanism," while "the novelist alone describes [the] actual genesis of

the illusion."<sup>11</sup> *On This Star* belongs to the romantic mode for the most part; but it approaches the novelistic at key moments, such as the passage discussed above that describes the origins of Erik's desire. The novelistic mode comes to the fore again in the episode of the deer hunt.

Erik, bitterly disappointed at Chel's failure to follow him to New York, stays away from the valley for two years. When he returns, he takes a perverse satisfaction in the discovery that Chel has suffered and that Jens has found more frustration than fulfillment in his marriage. He invites himself for the first time to participate in the great Eriksen deer hunt.

Erik is both indirectly and directly responsible for Jens's death. The chain of causation is set in motion when Erik's return reawakens Chel's interest in music, which she has given up since her marriage. Stirred by renewed feelings for Erik, she spends the evening before the hunt playing the piano instead of getting Jens's gear ready like a dutiful wife. When she hurriedly and guiltily attempts to make up for this lapse, she forgets to pack his red hunting coat. This omission is not discovered until the party is in the mountains, and Jens is therefore compelled to wear his brown chore coat with a red handkerchief tied to his head. Erik and Jens are posted at adjacent stands; Erik wounds a deer, follows its trail, thinks he sees it through the underbrush, and, predictably, shoots Jens. When he reaches the body, the face is turned away, but "Erik knew, before he fell on his knees, that it was Jens. It seemed to him that he had known it before he saw, before he even broke through the bushes. As he fired" (247).

The killing is technically an accident, but psychologically it is murder, and in Erik's responses the novel provides its deepest insights into the love-hate relationship involved in imitative desire:

*He had not loved Jens before, God knew; but he had hated him and envied him, knowing what these were. It had been Jens's perfection and his ease that he hated; the rich thoughtless exuberance of Jens'[s] taking everything. Jens had not meant to hurt anybody, but, simply as a child, he had gathered in with all his strength and built with all his strength. There had been no struggle with life, but*

*a perpetual conquering by mere forwardness, like an army moving forward with banners flying, without resistance. He had received the Kingdom without a struggle, and now, without fault, he had lost it. What he had been, glorious and apparently unlimited, Erik loved when he saw it destroyed. He knew this because of the very depth of his sorrow. He saw Jens'[s] running, jumping, laughing, overpowering boyhood, his openly desiring face and ready lips, his strong red skin shouting with blood when he splashed at Christine's washbasin. Jens had been good to touch. (251)*

The erotic quality of these feelings is sufficiently obvious. But then follows a crucially revealing line: "It seemed now that Erik had destroyed his own desire." And indeed, from this point on, there is no indication that Chel is an object of desire for Erik. It is only out of helpless pity that he escorts her home after she has come to him on the night of the funeral, her mind unhinged, convinced that all has happened according to divine plan to provide her with a man she can love physically and emotionally in this life and a faithful Mormon male she can have spiritually in the hereafter. The final irony is that Erik himself is killed by a jealous brother, Ivor, precisely at the point where nothing remains to be jealous of.

That is the final irony in the linear unfolding of the text—indeed, a too-abrupt and shocking termination, as though the narrative itself could not survive the extinction of Erik's consciousness. But the implications of imitative desire go further. If Erik desires Chel because Jens possesses her, how are we to understand Jens's feelings? The novel gives us very few interior views of Jens; and the implication is that, compared to Erik, he has a rather simple interior life. But we cannot avoid being struck by how little passion he exhibits as a lover. We are told that Jens has a reputation as a ladies' man, but he conducts himself toward Chel with extreme respect and restraint. He never seems to take seriously the possibility that she could be interested in Erik—even though Ivor, the most observant brother, realizes early on that Chel and Erik are attracted to each other and tries to warn Jens. We are left to conclude either that Jens is very

stupid or that his contempt for "little Erik" is so complete that he cannot imagine him as a rival. But as Girard points out, contempt is itself a sign of rivalry:

*In the quarrel which puts him in opposition to his rival, the subject reverses the logical and chronological order of desires in order to hide his imitation. He asserts that his own desire is prior to that of his rival; according to him it is the mediator who is responsible for the rivalry. Everything that originates with this mediator is systematically belittled although still secretly desired.<sup>12</sup>*

If Erik has experienced Jens as a lifelong rival-twin, always bigger and stronger and more beautiful, how has Jens experienced Erik? We know that he teased and bullied Erik when they were children, and that he was frequently punished by their father for doing so. We know, too, that Erik was "the Joseph," the favored son. We have to wonder—even though the data is lacking to answer the question—how much of Jens's life has been devoted to an effort to win his father's favor. He has been the "good" son, following his father's path of religious duty and serving a mission to the Old Country. How much submerged resentment is there in his contempt for Erik's accomplishments? At the beginning of the novel when Chel tries to suggest to Jens that Erik is a man of distinguished achievement, he reacts with incredulity:

*"Distinguished!" Jens shook his head, laughing. "Good Lord, Chel, he's the same age I am. He never could do much but play piano." The superiority of a man who has a talent for manly things lay in Jens' voice. It was a big joke in the family, the way the musicians came flocking to Templeton, just to pay Erik ten dollars an hour. (10)*

And yet, though Jens cares nothing about music himself, he is proud of Chel's talent, and very eager to have Erik recognize it. Jens in effect throws Chel and Erik together, then assiduously stays out of the way, allowing their attachment to grow.

Even though the evidence is sketchy, there is reason to suspect that Erik mediates Jens's desire much as Jens mediates Erik's. Jens is like the husband in Cervantes's tale of Anselmo and Lotario, who presses

his best friend to try to seduce his wife—ostensibly in order to prove her virtue, but really because only his friend-rival's desire can make her desirable to him.<sup>13</sup>

I have said little about Chel Bowen, and I am not prepared to unravel the very real perplexities her character poses. When Girard claims that the value cast upon the object of desire by the process of mediation is "illusory," he does not mean that the object possesses no intrinsic value, but rather that mimetic desire is not primarily a response to intrinsic value but to rivalry with the mediator. But there are other senses in which Chel Bowen's value is illusory. She is initially presented as an attractive and sympathetic character. indeed, a good case can be made that she, rather than Erik, was originally intended as the novel's protagonist. She is the flower of Mormon culture: product of a close and loving family, sensitive and intelligent yet at the same time filled with an unquestioning belief in the rightness of Mormon doctrine and the goodness of the Mormon way of life. Why, then, does she become so pitiful a figure, naive, deluded, fanatical, utterly incapable of coping with emotional crises? It seems to me that the author's attitude toward Chel changes as the novel proceeds, and she is increasingly used—victimized, really—as a means of criticizing elements of Mormon culture that Sorensen herself dislikes. In a sense, Chelnicia Bowen becomes a scapegoat. René Girard has some interesting things to say about that process as well. To explore those ideas would further demonstrate the strange power of this flawed but strongly imagined novel to stimulate speculative inquiry. But that would be a topic for another essay.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Edward A. Geary is a professor of English at Brigham Young University and a former AML president. He is the author of *Goodbye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood* (1985) and *The Proper Eye of the Sky: The High Plateau Country of Utah* (1993). This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 28 January 1989 at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

<sup>2</sup>*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 21.

<sup>3</sup>Virginia Sorensen, "Is It True?": The Novelist and His Materials," *Western Humanities Review* 7 (1953): 290-91.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 291.

<sup>5</sup>Virginia Sorensen, *On This Star* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946), 190. Quotations from this work are hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup>Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 6.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>13</sup>*Don Quixote*, Pt. 1, chaps. 33-35.

# Mercy, Zina, and Kate: Virginia Sorensen's Strong Women in a Man's Society

LuDene Dallimore<sup>1</sup>

**C**URIOUS MISSIE (New York: Harcourt, 1952) and *Miracle on Maple Hill* (New York: Harcourt, 1956) two of Virginia Sorensen's children's books, were the only titles familiar to me when she came to Weber State campus to read in October 1988. I was surprised by the breadth of her writing, as revealed by Linda Sillitoe's essay "Saints and Rebels: Introducing Virginia Sorensen's Novels."<sup>2</sup> The essay, read by her husband, John, introduced Virginia Sorensen's own reading of her works and her discussion of plans for future works. The titles of her novels, especially *A Little Lower than the Angels*, *The Neighbors*, *Kingdom Come*, and *The Evening and the Morning*<sup>3</sup> were most intriguing to me. I might add that my interest perversely increased when it was mentioned at last year's AML conference that obtaining copies was sometimes difficult. The challenge was rewarding for me as I read her eight novels and re-read several. (The children's books were already on my own shelves.)

This paper will focus on three novels which use cultural influences, particularly polygamy and insider/outsider conflict, as strategies for plot and character development of Sorensen's women characters. As a social observer, she uses the Mormon culture with its highly organized, closely structured religious beliefs and the practice (even though brief) of the biblical doctrine of family life. Polygamy and the patriarchal order placed women in situations where pressure from outside and internal strife (both inside the individual and inside the group) was intense. Using mixed desires for conforming and for breaking free, Sorensen develops women who show strength beyond the men who seem to hold the power over them.

All of her books mirror her own life—growing up in Sanpete County, attending Brigham Young University, and her first marriage, during which she traveled widely. She moved away from activity in the Church, but according to Mary Lythgoe Bradford, "as she moved 'outside,' her books became more 'inside.'"<sup>4</sup> She writes of her own ancestors, grandparents, parents, and herself in a way that preserves something of every Mormon's personal history.

Sorensen confronts some myths of the West from a woman's point of view. Women hardly exist in the classic Western novels, except as obvious types; but most of Sorensen's central characters are women, seldom types, though their experiences are often typical. Sorensen's women are in a Mormon society, a very male society. Much of the tension developing among those women comes from their awareness of their sexuality and their need to find themselves or be themselves in their structured setting.<sup>5</sup>

Sorensen obviously sympathized with the women's dilemmas since, as Sillitoe noted, "the leading men . . . [were] supporting actors all," though she adds they "are understandable, believable, and often sympathetic."<sup>6</sup> At other times, they are annoying and overbearing. The marvel at times is that they are objects of such intense loyalty and affection as Mercy grants Simon Baker, Zina, Dr. Niels Nielson, and Kate, Peter Jansen. In a letter to her biographers, L. L. and Sylvia Lee, Sorensen commented, "How being a woman was in my day and how protesting didn't work then—is probably the real subject of whatever book I write about Manti, and the Mormons in the next year or so."<sup>7</sup>

The title of Sorensen's first novel, *A Little Lower Than the Angels*, published in 1942, comes from Psalms 8:

*What is man that thou art mindful of him? and  
the son of man, that thou visitest him?  
For thou has made him a little lower than the  
angels, and hast crowned him with glory and  
honour.  
Thou madest him to have dominion over the  
works of thy hands; thou has put all things under  
his feet.  
(Ps. 8:4-6)*

The scripture is a compendium of most of the novel's themes, and most of those themes, in turn, are based on a contrast, a conflict of values.

The action of the novel takes place in Nauvoo and just across the Mississippi River in Iowa, during the late 1840s. Mercy, born in Rhode Island and living in Massachusetts when she met Simon, moves west with him. She brings her books with her, representing a kind of spiritual life that is opposed to the spirit of religion. Simon, on the other hand, objects harshly to the books. "They want folks that'll work, not folks sitting around on their hinders reading books."<sup>8</sup> There is ambiguity in the statement, however, because pioneer Mormons valued books and education. Simon, lover and conqueror of the land, represented cruder aspects of westering.<sup>9</sup>

Mercy, Sorensen's first heroine, and also her first "outsider," is developed through the inner conflict of believing. Mercy is forever asking why. She and Simon, who already have five children, have uprooted their lives for the Church; yet she is still unconverted and unbaptized. Sorensen does not argue whether Mormonism is a "true" religion but rather uses it to show the effect of religion and society upon people. Mercy accepts her husband's religion, not because she deeply believes it, but because she deeply loves her husband. She rebels against the smug faith of simple believers. Increasingly concerned about polygamy (and knowing that Simon will accept whatever the Church authorities tell him), Mercy feels sympathy for both Emma Smith and Eliza R. Snow. Most of the novel is a working out of the dilemma of polygamy for the people involved.

Mercy, worn out by repeated pregnancies, breaks down physically, and it becomes obvious to both Mercy and Simon that somebody must be brought into the home to care for the house and children. Brigham Young

recommends Charlot Leavitt, a strapping, healthy woman, whom Simon secretly marries as a plural wife. However, both Mercy and Jarvie, their oldest son, separately discover it. Bitter and unhappy, Jarvie questions the morality of the Church and its leaders' actions, thus representing a counterpoint to Simon's unquestioning zealotry. Both elements, interestingly enough, are still present in Mormon culture today. Mercy, ill and sorrowing over the loss of one of the twins, struggles to give Charlot her due. She had arrived to find everything in messy confusion but had swiftly reduced it to order:

*She was competent, Charlot. And what was more, she saw that everybody else was. There was not a wrinkle in the household that she did not tackle and smooth out. The first few days she had Simon get two of the Yeaman girls to come in and the three of them cleaned house from the loft to the cellar. And everything washable went into the washtub. (292)*

As Mercy gains strength, she attempts to reassert herself, but she cannot. In a short space of time, she has become dependent upon the strong, efficient, kindly Charlot even though it caused her intense personal pain. As Simon tries initially to explain the marriage,

*she let him flounder, because she could not speak. The wash of icy blood in her was already familiar, after one day, creeping into the fingers, down the thighs. . . . She heard him explaining, about Brigham, about circumstance, about necessity, about another world, about Brother Joseph himself. And as he spoke, she was thinking: He hates this, he hates it. He always hated these terrible emotional things that tore at him. Especially he hates woman-emotion, uncurbed and hysterical; he's like other men, he gets out of the room before it, he shuns it, embarrassed.*

*He loathed woman-emotion, he shunned it, loathing. She knew that if she wept, if she cried out and accused and begged and chided, he would be sharp against her, and that she could not have, not now. Even here she could conquer. This morning she would have been incapable of it, but now there was a cunning in her made of pain and desire and of a new unfamiliar hate. (322-23)*

In spite of Mercy's serious illness, Simon agrees when Brigham Young asks him to join the early group moving west. Leaving from Charlot's Nauvoo house (their Iowa house having been burned by gentiles), they crossed the road which leads to their burned-out house. Mercy does not speak and Simon thinks, "It's as well she shouldn't look; women are strange about such things" (427). His language is significant: Simon sees Mercy as representative of that strange class of beings called "women." He does not perceive her as an individual, despite the years of their marriage, despite his love for her, nor does he see her value. She is a "woman." As they pass, Mercy collapses and slips down from place head beside Simon—in itself a kind of feeble claim of her rightful place. She is dead.

Some critics have seen her death as a mechanical, contrived way to end the novel. Others say it is the only possible solution for Mercy. In the westward movement, her individuality did not count as much as the myths of the West have claimed.

In *Many Mansions*,<sup>10</sup> Sorensen develops another of her well-defined, interesting women, Zina, in terms of the Mormon view of morality as chastity and polygamy. Set in a small northern Utah town just after the Manifesto, this story blends some of Sorensen's best themes: landscape and personality, physical love and spiritual love, the excitement of learning with simple domesticity, and the certainty of religious faith with the complexities of doubt.<sup>11</sup>

Zina and Dr. Niels Nielsen are mutually attracted to each other while Zina cares for his invalid wife Mette. She goes to Salt Lake to study to become a midwife and nurse and then returns to the Nielsen household. A "believing member" of the Church, she nevertheless finds herself outside life's normal pattern by her long-term love for a man already married. Polygamy has passed, and community tensions over the issue form an early background for the novel. *Many Heavens* is reminiscent of *Ethan Fromm*, in which Edith Wharton uses the poverty and severity of harsh winter weather and reticent, noncommunicative relationships to develop the characters of Zeena and Mattie, a crippled wife and younger, more attractive woman. Even the names—Zeena and Mattie in *Ethan Fromm* and Zina and Mette in *Many Heavens*—seem

similar. The polygamous marriage, occurring after polygamy has officially been discontinued, makes the outcome far more pleasant in Virginia Sorensen's tale than in Edith Wharton's. (Four children are born to Zina and Niels, though they are not even minor characters.)

When Zina and Niels decide to resolve their love problems through the institution of polygamy, it comes after years of suffering; appropriately enough, it is Mette, the first wife, who suggests to Zina that when a man loves two women and cannot have both, one will always be afraid and the other alone, with no problems solved. "Why should all of us go on suffering so much?" To her the solution is obvious: since Niels loves both of them in different ways, why can't they all find peace? (347) Her ability to reach such a conclusion stems from experience; her own mother had been second wife to her father, and Mette had grown up in a happy home with memories of a satisfactory relationship.

Since the novel is told in first person by Zina, through use of the flashback technique Virginia Sorensen liked to use, the novel leaves the impression of a happy outcome. Though the three achieve a surface kind of approval from many, the novel avoids a direct confrontation with social sanctions. One of the few exceptions is neighbor Jim Kerr, who angrily accuses Niels: "Them that live like you and that nurse-woman—they can't afford to throw stones! Look where I found the two of you! I'd heard it aplenty. But I didn't believe it—you with a crippled wife! And her the one to tell me where I'd find you!" (9).

As the title suggests, there are "many heavens," and the principal characters must work out their own salvation under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. Zina herself suffers from uncertainty about the eternal implications of her decision. She says, "It's not as she [Mette] says, that we prefer this way or advocate it for other people. All we believe is that for *us* it happened to do" (349). Later she ponders, "And the law? If it ever came to that (and several before Jim Kerr thought they could drive a bargain with us), Wid says he could probably get us a special dispensation and rescue Niels from jail." More tellingly, she says, "Though I was married and I was not, though some of the people knew, and some

didn't. Even though it may be I'm eternally damned in that transaction, or it may be that I'm eternally blessed" (352).

The novel's major weakness is that it does not confront the larger social issues that lie at its basis. In compensation, it is a rich compendium of Mormon folklore and Utah's medical history. It begins and ends on an ambiguous note:

*Shadows roll down the mountain every night to hide whatever they must hide in mercy—but the sun comes up every morning to show—as Niels likes to say—that whatever has happened will be all right, after all. (352)*

Kate Alexander, the heroine of *The Evening and the Morning*,<sup>12</sup> is a complex, fascinating personality whose manifoldness reflects the world she comes from. She surely symbolizes the outsider but is not a simple, sympathetic rebel. She has both rebelled and yet still accepts some aspects of the Mormon world. Not completely innocent, she has been headstrong, selfish, and insensitive to others—her husband and children. After rebelling against God and her implacable surroundings, she discovers later that active rebellion brings only heartbreak unless one can turn the rebellion into a satisfying way of life. Kate tries to replace God with love:

*It had sometimes come to her that she had lost God too early, when she still needed the sustenance of her belief, and she had given love the reverence she must give to something, had been loyal to it, made sacrifices to it, believed in it without proof.*

But love fails her too, She laments:

*If you were a woman and a rebel, the only thing you could tear to pieces was your own life. So you turned upon yourself. There was no institution you could rend except at the place where it touched you; and so always you were the thing to be cut apart.*

It is only through a long struggle within herself that she finally finds comfort in the knowledge that her life will go on through her daughter Dessie and her daughter's daughter Jean (304).

Structurally, *Evening and Morning* calls up the Mormon world. The narrative is divided into six

"days," the biblical week, and the form creates a living connection between the religious world and the imagination. The flashback, a usual technique of Sorensen, is especially effective in allowing the past to be carefully integrated into a structure that at each step illuminates the present.

The character of Kate Alexander is drawn largely from the actual person of Sorensen's maternal grandmother, at least as the real person is re-created in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*.<sup>13</sup>

The novel begins with Kate returning to the small Mormon town (Manti) of her youth, her marriage, and her long-term affair with Peter Jansen. As she moves through the six days, she reexperiences her life and makes a crucial decision regarding her future. The flashbacks reveal Kate's marriage at sixteen to the widowed Karl Alexander, her love affair with Peter (who is married to Karl's first wife's sister), and Kate's pregnancy with Peter's child Dessie. To Kate, Dessie was a symbol of their love; to Peter she was a symbol of a great wrong.

After Karl's death, Kate is too ill, too weak, and too guilt-ridden to fight for her rights and those of her children. A woman in a man's society, Kate loses everything to Karl's son by his first wife. She asks Peter for help, but he can do nothing. She leaves her children to be cared for separately and leaves everything behind to try to survive. Returning years later, ostensibly to try to obtain a pension from her husband's war service, she reconnects with Dessie, filling in gaps and try to reestablish their relationship. In the process, Dessie gains new appreciation for some qualities of her husband, Ike. Not unlike Kate, he is an outsider, outspoken and liberal.

Going by train to visit Peter, Kate takes Jean, her granddaughter, whose red hair and features make her resemble Peter far more than Dessie does. There Kate comes to recognize her greatest illusion—her love for Peter. He, a widower, at last is free to care for her but is now a Mormon bishop, proud of his respectability. When he asks her if she wishes to stay, Kate cannot avoid noticing that his motive is mere duty. She refuses his proposal and is disappointed to note how obviously relieved he is.

The novel ends with Jean's innocent comment about resting after the long train ride prompting Kate's recollection of the scripture learned long ago:

*"And He rested. . . . And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. . . . Looking down at Jean, she thought again . . . it was very good. Perhaps our old allegories were not so bad, after all. Each one making what order he could from his own chaos. It could mean that, couldn't it? There had been a woman and she loved a man and through this love men and loves were multiplied. Perhaps one traveled in a great circle from love to love, first receiving and taking comfort only, as a child does, and finally coming to the love given to another child and no longer received. And behold, and behold, and behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day, morning after evening so one would never make the mistake of thinking anything ended without being also a new beginning. (339)*

Looking out the window of the train, she "watched herself moving beside herself, out there alone" (340). Linda Sillitoe described Kate in these terms:

*Kate differs from other heroines in Mormon novels of this vintage—Virginia Sorensen's among them—in that she does not wither, go mad, or die a faithful and bloodied saint. While she sins more blatantly than her more innocent counterparts, she suffers no more than the most righteous. Some may read punishment or even damnation in the fact that she ends the book alone and outside the church; however, she retains her sanity, her family, her independence, and projects living and growing into the future.<sup>14</sup>*

All in all, not that bad, many might say. These three women—Mercy, Zina, and Kate—were all outsiders placed in similar circumstances, a closed culture. Virginia Sorensen obviously held all three in high esteem. The effort and strains of fitting in juxtapose dynamic issues of conforming, of believing, of self-acceptance, of blooming or wilting under authoritarian power. Each copes in her own way. They are more than just memorable. They represent not only Mor-

mon women, then and now, but all women who attempt to find meaning in fulfilling the measure of their creation.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Linda Sillitoe, "Saints and Rebels: Introducing Virginia Sorensen's Novels," 17 October 1988; copy in library, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

<sup>3</sup>*A Little Lower Than the Angels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), *The Neighbors* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), *Kingdom Come* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), and *The Evening and the Morning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949).

<sup>4</sup>Mary Lythgoe Bradford, "Virginia Sorensen: A Saving Remnant," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 3 (1969): 60.

<sup>5</sup>L. L. Lee and Sylvia B. Lee, *Virginia Sorensen*, Boise State University Western Writers Series, No. 3 (Boise, Ida.: Boise State University, 1978), 8.

<sup>6</sup>"Saints and Rebels," 1.

<sup>7</sup>As quoted in Lee and Lee, *Virginia Sorensen*, 11.

<sup>8</sup>*A Little Lower Than the Angels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942). Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>9</sup>Lee and Lee, *Virginia Sorensen*, 19.

<sup>10</sup>*Many Mansions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954). Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>11</sup>"Virginia Sorensen," 59.

<sup>12</sup>*The Evening and the Morning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949). Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>13</sup>See Lee and Lee, *Virginia Sorensen*, 30. *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963).

<sup>14</sup>"Saints and Rebels," 10.



# Women Together: Kate Alexander's Search for Self in *The Evening and the Morning*

Grant T. Smith<sup>1</sup>

VIRGINIA SORESENSEN, in a lecture at the University of Utah Writers' Conference, 1953, discussed "the great human struggle for which writers are endlessly concerned," the struggle for identity, for individuality, for a place and an importance. According to Sorensen, this fascinating struggle for discovery of self begins when the individual first asks himself or herself, "Who am I? Where am I? From what place must I look out at the world? What is my own truth?"<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps nowhere in Sorensen's canon of literature is this pursuit of self-discovery better illustrated than in her fourth novel, *The Evening and the Morning*. For in this work, the protagonist, Kate Black Alexander, returns to Manti, her hometown, and in six days relives her past to determine her future. She confronts the very issues Sorensen considers to be most important: Who is Kate Alexander? What universal truths does she discover folded in her Mormon Utah heritage? What is her place and importance as a mother, grandmother, feminist, and friend? Various scholars have convincingly argued that Kate's experience is transcendent, that by reliving the past she not only illuminates the present as a hard, bitter, realistic vision of solitary existence but transcends the past, finding strength in her aloneness and asserting her own painful independent stance.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars argue that even though Kate finds herself alone at the conclusion of the novel, having rejected Mormonism and consequently the Mormon community, her independence and freedom are based on love for others; and thus the novel is an affirmation of the individual in positive relation to others. Kate is a tragic figure as a woman misshaped by a society unwilling to allow a certain kind of freedom, but Kate is also a heroic figure as she carves her own destiny based on love.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly it can also be said that Kate's discovery is one of her own sexuality and the bright, desperate, and temporary wholeness and joy that this sensual awareness brings. Kate's sexual enlightenment is not without cost, however, as it is accompanied by pangs of guilt and remorse. Fulfillment of self, Kate learns, consists of a full range of experience: joy and sorrow, freedom and obligation, love and fear. Hence, Kate's sexual growth and her inevitable realization of its consequences becomes for Sorensen a metaphor for a broader issue of the reality of opposition in all things, an issue familiar to Mormon readers.

Bruce W. Jorgensen, in a 1980 *Dialogue* essay, identifies several conflicts in Kate's journey of self-discovery: her estrangement from Dessie, her rebellion against the social order, her intense need to belong, yet her strong desire for autonomy. Jorgensen suggests that any self-discovery Kate may experience is based partly on the tragically problematic opposition of autonomy and belonging, which he claims "touches on the deepest concept of selfhood in Joseph Smith's theology." Jorgensen concludes that Kate, to find authenticity in her existence, must live out or endure the tension between her need for autonomy and her need to belong, as it cannot be resolved theoretically nor solved in experience. He cites Mormon philosopher B. F. Cummings: "The self is insubordinate, wandering, imperially aloof, solitary, lonely, withdrawn, unvisited, impenetrable." It "cannot escape from existence nor can it escape from the awareness of its existence" nor from the "inevitable sense of solitude" that is "born of the very fact of individuality," of "being an eternally identical one."<sup>5</sup>

This rather bleak view of self brings the reader to a set of critical questions: Can Kate Alexander find a sense of belonging that does not compromise her autonomy? Can she find a style of female identity that is powerful, yet favors the communal over the individual? Or, does she as Jorgensen suggests, define her self riding in the nowhere of in-between, as a solitary rebel angel projected on outer darkness?<sup>6</sup>

I propose that Kate Alexander not only satisfies her quest for an independent identity (as a self-supporting feminist social worker from Los Angeles) but also resolves the paradox of autonomy versus belonging by "connecting" with a community of women (Kate, Dessie, and Jean) that becomes an emblem of her own self-sufficiency and independence. This individuation process culminating in a trinity of women is defined not in male terms of opposition and separation, but in female terms of interconnection and interaction. It is for this reason that Kate returns to Manti, to initiate the process of creating and connecting a self to a community that she had not previously enjoyed. I propose that readers and scholars limit and perhaps misinterpret Kate's process of self-discovery by failing to differentiate between male and female individuation.<sup>7</sup>

According to traditional Freudian psychoanalytical thought, the male must separate his identity from his mother and begin to identify with his father. This break in identification that brings about a distancing from nurturance, intimacy, and connectedness, characterizes the male model of independence, the male idealization of autonomy. Independence and separateness are certainly prime elements in Cummings' remarks; the emphasis is on an "imperially aloof, solitary, lonely, withdrawn, unvisited, impenetrable" male self. It is not necessarily the female self, and I do not think it is Kate Alexander's self.

Indeed, among contemporary North American women (I'll include Sorensen and Kate), the search for a strong and fresh identity is often motivated by the urgent need to avoid this patriarchal style of identity, an identity maintained through opposition and excluding the "other." This type of "Lone

Ranger" identity they feel is inevitably pernicious, manifesting itself in racism, chauvinism, sexism, and nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

Recent feminist criticism of individualism has taken psychoanalysis itself to task in part for its tendency to make independence and separateness the goal of development. Feminist critics argue that individuality is properly, ideally, a balance of separation and connectedness, of the capacities for free agency and relatedness.<sup>9</sup> They see the world comprised of relationships, rather than of people standing "imperially aloof," a world that coheres through human connection rather than through a system of rules. This awareness of the connection between people gives rise to a recognition of responsibility for one another, a perception of the need for caring.<sup>10</sup> Hence, it is significant and revealing that Kate Alexander becomes a social worker in California. She believes in caring, whereas Peter, who provides food for his ward members out of a sense of duty as bishop, and who feels burdened with an obligation to now provide for Kate, is concerned about being just. Kate realizes she is "without boundaries in either time or space . . . between everywhere and everything and therefore nowhere at all,"<sup>11</sup> and thus she creates a place for a feminist identity of self that includes the "other" as equal, rather than excludes the "other" as opposing self.

Sorensen alludes to this "creation" of self in her title *The Evening and the Morning*, which echoes Genesis and the myth of creation.<sup>12</sup> This myth, as well as Indian creation myths, dominates Kate's thoughts as she awakens on the sixth day of her stay in Manti. Kate has spent the past six days creating meaning in her existence. As she meditates upon her past she continually builds or (if we are to use Joseph Smith's definition of *create* from the King Follett Sermon) *organizes* a self from the chaos/matter of her past. I find it personally unsatisfying to conclude that this creation of self is only that of a solitary rebel projected on outer dark. Rather, it is infinitely more satisfying to view this creation as an organization of a community of women, a community that asserts a paradoxical truth of the human experience: we know ourselves as separate only

insofar as we live in connection with others, and we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self.<sup>13</sup>

This feminist concept of women not trapped in immanence but rather realizing transcendence in a gender community is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men. Kate, "in coming, in yielding, in walking blindly along the steep sun-struck roads . . . year after year, sometimes with months between" (284), lives for and through Peter and Karl, needing importance in their eyes. She attains identity in the Manti community of adulthood through masculine relationships alone. But this feminist concept is not contrary to myth or traditional western literature.

Communities of women (almost always triads of women) are prevalent and significant in classical mythology as symbols of female self-sufficiency, symbols that at times are maimed and outcast, but at other times are forceful and feared. The Graeae, the Gray Women of Greek myth, shared a single eye and a single tooth among them. This seeming mutilation stood for a primitive concept of the Goddess as three in one and one in three, and suggests a corporate and contradictory vision of a community that is simultaneously defective and transcendent. Similar paradoxical visions can be witnessed in the Gorgons and Amazons where the female communities tend to evoke an image of the maimed (the Amazons would amputate their breasts to free themselves for unencumbered battle) and the alienated, manless, and thus incomplete, yet fierce and threatening.

Other triads of women, though manless, are neither maimed nor estranged; indeed, the Muses, originally a triad and the primordial Triple Goddess, maintained control over that part of human imagination which endures and which defines life itself, memory. Equally powerful are the Fates, three sisters who wove human and divine destiny through their fingers with an unspecified power not even Zeus could controvert. These various visions of female communities in Greek mythology constitute a drama that contradicts more recent cultural im-

ages of female submission, subservience, and fulfillment in a male bounded world. The mythological communities and the community that Kate Alexander connects in *The Evening and the Morning* are isolated, yet self-sustaining; maimed, yet potent; unified, yet autonomous. These communities gain substance and stature from the trials of isolation and mutilation, and derive the power to repel or incorporate the male-defined reality that had previously excluded them.<sup>14</sup>

This community of women that resolves belonging and autonomy is not conventional; indeed, as Nina Auerbach claims in *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, "As a literary idea, a community of women feeds dreams of a world beyond the normal."<sup>15</sup> I suggest that Kate Alexander creates such a world during her stay at Manti and that, as a world that relies upon inclusion rather than separation, caring rather than judging, and selflessness rather than envy, this creation/community is an inherent and powerful component of society's shared cultural vision.

The first task of this paper is to examine the "chaos" of communities in Kate Alexander's universe as Kate perceives them. Why, after all, must Kate organize "community/matter" if the organization or community already exists that can offer her autonomy and belonging? Why were the existing communities not responsive and not adequate to her needs as a woman/being/mother/lover/Mormon? What is the nature and function of these communities and what was Kate's relationship to each of them?

The most dominant community of course is Manti, Utah. Sorensen's Manti in the early 1900s is not exclusively male nor female, nor is it exclusively Mormon; yet, as a predominantly Mormon community it is also predominantly patriarchal and it is predominantly closed to anyone (including Kate) who does not conform outwardly to the community's Mormon/patriarchal beliefs. Evidence of closed nature lies in the town's ostracizing the "outsiders," the Italian railroad workers. Undoubtedly Ike too feels victimized by the ostracism, for

he vows at the end of the novel to move his family to Salt Lake City to prevent Manti from perverting his own family with its narrow attitudes.<sup>16</sup>

Robert King and Kay Atkinson King in a 1984 *Dialogue* essay identify six elements in the Mormon community that contribute to the creation of strict and rigid boundaries between the community and its surroundings: (1) the presence of Mormon ritual, (2) the uniqueness of Mormon doctrine and beliefs, (3) a strong sense of service and sacrifice to the community, (4) a persecution complex or direct conflict with other outsiders, (5) polygamy, and (6) unusual dietary practices as represented by the Word of Wisdom.<sup>17</sup> Certainly these six elements help describe Kate's hometown, causing it to be a firmly bounded society where access to membership is difficult and leaving is infrequent. But Kate does leave the community long before she is driven out by Marya and Karlie because she does not accept many of the very elements that cement the community.

In Manti, Utah, in the early 1900s, to apostatize from the Church is to apostatize from the community. Kate rejects Mormon doctrine, specifically the sanctity of a monogamous marriage and the belief in a contemporary prophet, Brigham Young. As a young girl, "it was Brother Brigham [Young] she blamed, the smiling wealthy symbol of power, with his fine square face and his staunch belly and his word-of-God like an eternal brand upon the villages" (20). She describes Brigham as sexually charged, "hands folded on his paunch, sweating like a butcher, so full of meat" (20) with a pretty woman beside him in the carriage. Young Kate, dressed in white like a "blessed angel," rather than strewing the flowers obediently before the Mormon prophet's buggy as she and the other girls were assigned to do when Brigham visited Manti, throws them angrily behind her and stamps on them. Her rebellion is born, thus, in her rejection of a foundational Mormon belief in modern-day prophets, and her rebellion continues in her adulterous affair with Peter.

It is clear that at a later date, perhaps after she had left Manti, she also rejects God ("lost God too early" (304)); and certainly she questions the Mormon proclivity to see the world in bifurcated terms:

God/Satan, righteous/wicked, faith/doubt, Saints/gentiles. She counsels her grandson, Karl, to be careful of absolutes. "There are so many ideas for saving the world," she tells him. "You didn't think ours was the only one, did you? Keeping America American—Keeping Mormon Mormon—" (207).

But even before Kate is physically driven from the community, she doctrinally distances herself from the Church and thus community. She does not attend community worship on the Sabbath, thinking Sunday "as good for hanging a wash out as any Monday to follow" (25). Consequently she does not participate in communal singing of hymns, public prayer, testimony bearing and public exhortations, or sacrament. Although she and Karl were presumably married in the Salt Lake Temple, she no longer wears the "hideous" temple undergarment most Mormons consider sacred, and she certainly no longer participates in temple rituals, confessing little interest in temple genealogy. When Kate's resistance evolves into a "smooth and rationalized rebellion" (42), she concludes that even the community's strong tradition of service and sacrifice had been mere "necessities of virtue and duty" (42) not performed in love.

Therefore, even though Kate shares a sense of history, common culture, and love for the land with her Manti citizens, she does not share their ideological beliefs or goals. This disjunction causes her ultimately to distance herself from the community, "a place with many good things to remember but of course best to forget" (4), to apostatize from the Church, and to isolate herself in an attempt to survive as a distinct identity. Dispossessed of a community, Kate seeks self-possession; this search eventually returns her to Manti and to a new feminist community that accepts her without narrow restraints.

Kate's creation of a feminist community presupposes an absence of community in her life, a loss to be recovered. Indeed, this is the essence of *The Evening and the Morning*. Yet there are several communities of women in the novel that Kate rejects, offends, or abandons to such a degree that they too, like the dominant Manti/Mormon com-

munity which attempted to define her code of conduct, fail to fulfill in her a combined sense of autonomy and belonging that I again assert is the goal of her ontological quest. Kate's understanding of reconciliation of self, of atonement, at-one-ment, is to "return to oneness and to belonging with others in the world where one happened to be, to erase the horror of being outside and alone" (148). Kate's atonement is realized best in a community of women that finds selfhood and strength in embracing one another. This type of feminist community is utterly lacking in the early female communities in Kate's life.

The first deficient female community is the three "aunts" who substitute as a mother figure for Kate when her own mother dies. Ironically, years after leaving Manti, Kate recognizes that this polygamous community comes close to the ideal of reconciling autonomy and belonging. She claims:

*Once polygamy was established and accepted in a community, pride wasn't a matter of being well loved by one man any more, holding him firmly in a house, keeping him contented enough and obligated enough to stay there. A woman could be proud of how well she got along with the rest of the women. . . . She didn't have to be afraid. (256)*

The three aunts, focusing their attention on the familial community rather than oppositional others, strengthened the community while maintaining an interdependent relationship.

But Kate as a sixteen-year-old, unquestionably and understandably tired of that "incredible house," rejects that community of women, and accepts Karl Alexander's marriage proposal, not because she loves him, "but because she was proud that an important man like Karl Alexander had noticed her" (43). Karl was a "relief" to Kate from the "situation like her mother's" and from the excited, fumbling boys that she no longer needed to please. Kate, although already considered a rebel, "full of independent ideas" (32), temporarily abandons these "ideas" and begins to define herself in Karl's gaze, in a traditional, fixed, female role based upon her husband's expectations and approval. This role could easily have

evolved into a "pleasant tradition," a "pleasant casualness of common age" (144), if Kate had not seen Karl kissing her sister, Verna, on the porch that moonlit night.

The second deficient community of women that Kate rejects is the imposing triumvirate of Marya, Helga, and Christine Thugersen, three sisters who bar Kate from their circle. Christine, of course, is deceased, yet her spirit and influence are as present in Kate's home as are her carpets and furnishings that Karl fails to replace. Also prevalent is the pervading concept of wife hierarchy—that as Karl's first wife on earth, Christine will be Karl's first and rightful wife in heaven. Marya and Helga take considerable satisfaction that Karl is buried next to Christine, thus restoring what they saw as a union broken by Kate's intrusion. Marya and Helga seldom visit Kate after Kate and Karl marry; but when they do, Kate feels their "eyes critical on all her arrangements" (60) and feels her exclusion. Sorensen illustrates the sinister perversity of this community of women by reversing the function or role of each member in the group from the traditional concept of trinity in myth. A conventional female trinity often consists of a young virgin, a birth-giving matron, and a wise old crone. The Thugersen trinity however presents the antithesis: Marya is "a Mary" [sic], an unforgiving, unloving, un-Christlike judgmental figure; Helga is tragically infertile, producing one terribly handicapped child and too horrified to risk another child; Christine, by her absence, is the absence of wisdom and understanding, an absence that will finally destroy Karl's family. It is therefore understandable how and why Kate rejects this second community of women.

But Kate is not without blame in her exclusion from a community. Believing foolishly and selfishly that love for Peter was sufficient to sustain herself, Kate offended and violated the women around her by continuing her adulterous affair with a "sister's" husband. She brazenly invades Helga's home, witnessing Helga's failure (the deformed child). She defiles her own marriage bed by conceiving a child

out of wedlock, and she breaks the whispered, if not unspoken female code of trust, loyalty, and virtue among women.

It is significant that when "righteous Marya" confronts Kate with the accusation of this betrayal, she cannot bring herself to speak the final words of accusation:

*Kate Black, you are a low and wicked woman. I wouldn't be surprised if some of your own children—If you think I'd ever tell what I know! Of course not! But there are plenty who'll say what you are, without Helga being mentioned or Peter either. A woman with daughters and grown sons! If you think I think Peter is responsible! When a woman is like that. . . .*  
(289)

The charge is left unuttered, unutterable. Marya's accusation is left unuttered, unutterable. Her accusation is buried in a language not spoken, in a language not only of her righteous indignation, humiliation, and fear but also of her female sense of fealty to her community of sisters.

Despite the destructiveness of Kate's betrayal of Marya, Helga, and Christine, her fall from grace is not complete until she offends another community—her own daughters, Dessie and Martha. When Kate flees Manti, leaving her two daughters in the care of their aunts, she not only physically breaks up the family but she also psychologically scars Dessie and prevents her from achieving personal wholeness. Dessie, vulnerable to abandonment, as an adult fears and hates being alone. She is timid, frightened, and insecure. She blames and hates her mother "because of things only half remembered" (12) for this debilitating condition. "A person ought to know her mother better than I know mine" (28), she laments. These are the psychic wounds that Kate and Dessie must heal, the wounds that are intimated in the first paragraph of the novel as Kate and Jean sit on the back porch steps "getting acquainted" while Dessie, indoors and separated, makes "the final sounds of her day washing the dishes" (3). The scene echoes Luke 10:38-41 where Jesus and Mary sit conversing while Martha "cumbered about much serving," attends to the daily chores. Dessie too must

learn to choose "that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." She and Kate together must resolve the alienation, the separation, the "pushing away," that prevents them from achieving not only a mother-daughter intimacy, but also a satisfied sense of being in a circle of womanhood.

Kate must atone for her heinous sin against nature (abandoning her daughters) and she does so in the classic journey of descent into the underworld (the Thistle boarding house and Tintic mining experiences), penance in California as a social worker, and ascent again to Manti where she receives restitution and forgiveness. This resolution of a "ragged unfinished feeling" (64) leaves Dessie and Kate at peace with themselves, "women together," speaking freely, explaining the clouded memories and questions that had for so long impeded their individual development.

There is, I believe, a third community of women that Kate apparently rejects in *The Evening and the Morning*. It is the community of women most visible in contemporary Mormon wards, yet barely discernible in Sorensen's novel—the Relief Society, an organization of women formed 17 March 1842 under Joseph Smith's direction. Although Kate claims she always saw the need for a society dedicated to helping others and although as a child she felt "safe enclosed in the dark tent of quilt and skirts of women" (149) as she hid beneath their quilting frames, she also felt a "hostility" in the women that frightened her. Later, as the Relief Society gathers at Dessie's home to make flowers for the July 24 parade, Kate senses again the "panting, nervous, suspicion" among the women and she wonders why they did not,

*find peace of mind in the strength of all those Lilliputian threads of their ordinary lives, the intricate marvelous threads which tied them with their men and their children for a little while? In quiet and peace their task of holding fast would be simplified and take beauty and dignity upon itself; for the task consisted, after all, of making each tie, in its very accustomedness, as necessary and as precious as possible. (144-45)*

Kate does not explicitly reveal why the women do not find peace, strength, beauty, and dignity in their community, but she apparently finds this community personally unacceptable, lacking self-sufficiency and trust.

Sorensen's inattention to the Relief Society in the novel cannot be ignored; in fact, it can be perceived as an indirect indictment of the nature and function of the Relief Society in 1922. When Joseph Smith authorized the organization of the Relief Society in 1842, he gave the body of women an autonomy not enjoyed by Kate's Manti sisters. He instructed them to elect their own president (They elected Joseph's wife, Emma, who in turn chose as counselors Elizabeth Ann Whitney and Sarah M. Cleveland) and he turned "the key" to the women "in the name of God" calling upon "knowledge and intelligence" to "flow down from this time."<sup>18</sup> "Keys" were commonly associated with "priesthood" and it appears, at least in 1842, that Joseph turned the priesthood key to the women, later ordaining and setting them apart to exercise various spiritual gifts and powers. This concept of women holding the priesthood in connection with their husbands was practiced throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Women participated equally with their male counterparts in rebuking evil spirits, blessing their children and the sick, prophesying in the name of the Lord, and washing and anointing women about to give birth. From their membership in the Relief Society, the women saw themselves as an essential part of Church organization, functioning alongside the priesthood in implementing and supervising temporal concerns. From their participation in spiritual affairs through the exercise of spiritual gifts and their share in the uses of the priesthood, and especially from the promise of godhood which awaited the faithful man and woman only together, nineteenth-century Mormon women felt themselves to be an integral, viable force within the kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup>

This integral viable body of women was not present, however, in 1922. Even though the interconnection of the priesthood and Relief Society first enunciated by Joseph Smith was continually

reinforced by later Church presidents, by the turn of the century there was a significant and clear delineation between the male priesthood bearers and female Relief Society members. The latter part of the nineteenth century saw a removal of spiritual responsibilities from women and a linkage of those rights with the priesthood alone. In 1914, President Joseph F. Smith said that "mothers" and "young women" must "calmly" accept the fact that "women do not hold the Priesthood" and that those women who preside over the Relief Society (now called by men rather than elected by women) received their authority from the presiding priesthood. In 1922, the year Kate returns to Utah, President Heber J. Grant issued a statement that women should not be identified with priesthood quorums. Thus the pattern of removing women from the realm of anything associated with the role of male Priesthood had been established, clarified, and confirmed by a prophet of God.<sup>20</sup> In a bitter irony, to the extent that women had faith in the Mormon president's prophetic claims, to that extent they felt bound to collaborate in their diminution and loss of power.

The extent to which Virginia Sorensen understood this pattern of history is not clear, but the evidence that she sensed it—perhaps only on an intuitive level—is unmistakable. This pattern of removing power and equality from the women in the Relief Society was the climate in which Kate Black Alexander resided from the late 1800s to 1907 (the year she left Manti) to 1922 (the year she returned). Strong, full-lipped, wild, independent Kate, who secretly read her mother's poems and the "poems of the Englishmen," naturally rejects a society of women that no longer is perceived as interconnected with and equal to the male priesthood.

The second task of this paper is to describe the community of women with which Kate connects that serves not only as a definition of self, but also as a definition of responsibility to others. This community of Kate/Dessie/Jean is the authentic trinity of wise crone, birth-giving matron (Dessie is pregnant), and young virgin. This community is conceived in ritual and bonded in care. The bonding

and caring is demonstrated throughout the novel as Kate and Dessie can fruit, prepare picnics, and sew paper flowers together, "feeling a way toward closeness," a "wider goodness," a "finished feeling" (100). The bonding and caring between Kate and her granddaughter is manifested not only in the kinship they share in their spirited personalities, but also in the protection, defense, and empathy that Kate provides for Jean. Nowhere in the novel is this better illustrated than when Jean suffers her own loss of innocence. She too learns that love is not always what it appears to be and not always enough when Clay neither speaks nor moves in her defense, but looks "toward the street" as Jean is crudely molested by the "Gang." Although Jean does not reveal the ugly incident to Kate, it is Kate who soothes Jean's wounds and comforts her heart. Kate eases Jean into a truer understanding of self and acceptance of self without deceit. "For a moment she [Jean] was caught in the need to repeat the lie . . . but she could not bring herself to do it. Not just now in front of Kate" (309).

The ritual of community bonding is demonstrated in the process of repentance that Kate undertakes. Kate does not confess directly to Dessie (Ike's role as father/priest should be noted.) but she does admit her sin ("I don't excuse myself. I suppose I made a mistake," 304). Dessie, "perceiving meanings," absolves Kate.

*She was trying to forgive. There was no use saying more than she had said with such difficulty already, and Kate wished she would not. Yet she knew now it would be possible for them to speak later, to be women together as she had hoped. And this was enough. (310)*

The evening rain which cleanses the air also cleanses Kate and allows her to breathe deeply and swiftly in hopes of a "climax of receiving" (311). But this purifying climax is delayed; even though Kate and Dessie have resolved their differences and even though Kate and Jean have bonded in a mutual recognition of kindred spirits of self and other, a bond symbolized by their mutual baptism of renewal at Brother Tucker's dam, Kate still feels intolerable loneliness and the need to seek herself at Peter's home in Nephi.

In Nephi Kate learns important truths that clarify her perception of self. Perhaps for the first time she sees Peter as he is: frightened, weak, alone, dutiful, obligated to the Church but not to relationships. Peter, as he was before, fearful that recognition and acceptance of his daughter Dessie would force him to connect with Kate, still fails to arrive at the center by accepting his granddaughter, Jean. He separates himself instead with an oath, a promise, a verbal commitment to make Jean a fiddle, even though Jean shows no interest in the favor. Peter's definition of self and responsibility is masculine—a commitment to obligations rather than a responsiveness to others. Kate now sees Peter, "clearly . . . as if he were a person apart from herself for the first time" (333). "Scoured clean" she walks out of his house and returns with Jean to the train station, ostensibly a solitary figure who sees the solemn oval of her face as she moves "beside herself, out there alone" (344).

But to conclude that the reader's last image of Kate is one of a singular self in unavoidable self-awareness is to ignore the granddaughter curled up on the train seat with her head in Kate's lap. It is to ignore the fact that the train is returning Kate and Jean to Manti and to Dessie where the three women will form a community based upon truth and honesty and love. It is to ignore Kate's final recollection of Genesis: "And he rested . . . And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (341). Kate recognizes that it would be a mistake to think that "anything ended without being also a new beginning" (341), and the form that Kate builds from chaos lies in her lap and awaits her still in Manti.

This community of "women together" is neither weak, submissive, nor detached; these elements dissolved when Kate, Dessie, and Jean replaced personal reflection and blind commitment with dialogue and response. This community of women redefines the concept of autonomy. Autonomy is not necessarily based upon independence. Indeed, interdependence is the key. Interdependence does not mean helplessness, powerlessness, nor lack of control; rather, it signifies a conviction that one is able to have an effect on others, as well as the rec-



ognition that the interdependence of attachment empowers both the self and the other, not one at the other's expense.<sup>21</sup> This nonoppositional view of being requires self confidence, for only the truly self-confident can recognize dependence as superior to independence.

Virginia Sorensen remarked in a 1980 *Dialogue* interview that she was delighted that people thought Kate Alexander was a "feminist" character.<sup>22</sup> As a feminist who defines a feminist character herself in terms of a community instead of in terms of separation, Kate Alexander creates a vision of humanity that is important to all readers concerned with the paradox of autonomy and belonging, and especially to Mormon readers who share a heritage of a spiritual and temporal commitment to community living.

On 9 February 1831, in the presence of twelve elders, Joseph Smith received a revelation which embraced "the law of the church," so designated because it established the laws of Church government and moral conduct for its members.<sup>23</sup> The broad context of this revelation introduced the economic system of Zion, a term Mormons use to denote a community/people of "one heart and one mind," dwelling in righteousness with "no poor among them" (Moses 7:18).<sup>24</sup> Designated the law of consecration and aimed at the total elimination of poverty, the law is "to remember the poor, and consecrate of thy properties for their support that which thou has to impart unto them, with a covenant and a deed which cannot be broken" (D&C 42:30). Literally the law of consecration requires that Church members consecrate their property, time, talents, and material wealth to the Church "for the building of the kingdom of God and the establishment of Zion."<sup>25</sup>

Joseph Smith made two serious attempts to implement the principles of the law: the first in May 1831, in Thompson, Ohio, with a group of Mormons known as the Colesville Branch; the second in Kirtland, Ohio, and Independence, Missouri. Both attempts failed and on 10 April 1834, the law was suspended. Nevertheless, the tradition of the law of consecration remains among members of the Mor-

mon Church today who view it as the will of the Lord and who still covenant in their temple rituals to give all of their material possessions to the Church.

I am not suggesting that Kate Alexander creates a Zion community based upon the law of consecration, but I do suggest that the spirit of Kate's community, a spirit of caring, sharing, and bonding "one heart and one mind" is the same spirit, the same "change of heart" that Church members today associate with this celestial commandment. I also suggest that this spirit is not gender fixed. It is Stensie who transports Kate and Jean on the Peavine, a masculine symbol that nevertheless makes Jean feel "much at home," and Ike clearly embodies a Zion-like attitude as he unconditionally accepts and shares with those whom the Manti community has rejected. It is ironic, then, that Kate Black Alexander, the black sheep of the Mormon fold, with her rebel son-in-law, achieves not only a vision of self, but also a vision of a true Zion community. Kate creates a self that merges autonomy and belonging in a union of caring, being there, listening, helping, and understanding—a union that takes on a moral dimension relevant to Mormon readers and vital to any reader today.

In "Remapping the Moral Domain," Carol Gilligan concludes that as the knowledge that others are capable of care renders them lovable (Kate) rather than reliable (Peter), so the willingness and the ability to care become a standard of self-evaluation. In this active construction, dependence and belonging, rather than signifying a failure or weakness of individuation, denote a decision on the part of the individual to enact a vision of love.<sup>26</sup> This vision, I suggest, is the true creation Kate sees reflected in the train window as she watches herself moving beside herself, but now not alone.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Grant T. Smith is a Ph.D. candidate in American literature at the University of Iowa, and this paper is an early version of a chapter from his dissertation on Mormon women's literature. He presented this paper at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 27 January 1990, at Westminster College of Salt Lake City.

<sup>2</sup>Virginia Sorensen, "Is It True? The Novelist and His [sic] Materials," *Western Humanities Review* 7 (1953): 284-85.

<sup>3</sup>L. L. Lee and Sylvia B. Lee, *Virginia Sorensen*, Boise State University Western Writers Series, No. 3 (Boise, Ida.: Boise State University, 1978), 31, 34.

<sup>4</sup>Sylvia B. Lee, "The Mormon Novel: Virginia Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning*," in *Women, Women Writers, and the West*, edited by L. L. Lee and Merrill Lewis (Troy, N.Y.: Whitson Publishing Co., 1979), 217.

<sup>5</sup>Jorgensen, "Herself Moving Beside Herself Out There Alone: The Shape of Mormon Belief in Virginia Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 3 (1980): 56.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>7</sup>For a detailed analysis of the difference between male and female individuation, see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Chodorow claims that the female identity formation begins in the pre-Oedipal phase and takes place in a context of ongoing relationship with the mother. Girls, in identifying themselves as female, experience themselves as like their mothers, thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation. This is in contrast to the boys who in defining themselves as masculine separate their mothers from themselves, consequently curtailing a self defined by continuous relationships. Carol Gilligan draws similar conclusions after studying male-female interview responses to moral issues. Gilligan suggests in *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) that women's identity is viewed in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care. Women see morality as arising from the experience of connection and conceived as a problem of inclusion rather than one of balancing claims (160). This perspective is quite unlike the men's identity, where involvement with others is tied to a qualification of identity rather than to its realization. Instead of attachment, individual achievement rivets the male imagination, and great ideas or distinctive activity define the standard of self-assessment and success (160). Sorensen illustrates this male individuation in her treatment of the struggle between young Karl and his father, Ike.

<sup>8</sup>Anne Carolyn Klein, "Finding a Self: Buddhist and Feminist Perspectives," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, edited by Clarissa Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, Inc., 1987), 192.

<sup>9</sup>Jessica Benjamin, "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space," *Feminist Studies: Critical Studies*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986), 81-82.

<sup>10</sup>Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 29-30.

<sup>11</sup>Virginia Sorensen, *The Evening and the Morning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), 30. Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>12</sup>The title may also allude to *The Evening and the Morning Star*, a Mormon newspaper first printed in June 1832, to give "news of the gospel," publish revelations and "herald the return of Israel to the favor of God." Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1977), 145. I have no evidence that Sorensen was aware of the publication, but she was a Brigham Young University graduate and an active member of the Church for the early part of her writing career, so it is certainly possible that she knew about the newspaper. This allusion, if purposeful, would add a new dimension to her novel as a second publication of the gospel's good news.

<sup>13</sup>Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 63.

<sup>14</sup>Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 6.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Sylvia B. Lee suggests that, by moving to Salt Lake City, Ike and Dessie are not fleeing the Mormon world per se but rather avoiding the "small town thinness of spirit" and "narrowness of the closed community" that could exist in any small American town. "The Mormon Novel," 216, 127.

<sup>17</sup>Robert R. King and Kay Atkinson King, "The Effect of Mormon Organizational Boundaries on Group Cohesion," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, 1 (Spring 1984): 61-75.

<sup>18</sup>Linda King Newell, "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 22.

<sup>19</sup>Carol Cornwall Madsen, "Mormon Women and the Struggle for Definition," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 40-47.

<sup>20</sup>Newell, "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood," 21-32.

<sup>21</sup>Gilligan, "Remapping the Moral Domain," 241.

<sup>22</sup>Mary L. Bradford, "If You Are a Writer, You Write! An Interview with Virginia Sorensen," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): 34. However, being a rebel is not without its risks, even for Sorensen, as Linda Sillitoe points out in "The Upstream Swimmers: Female Protagonists in Mormon Novels," *Sunstone* 4, no. 4 (1979): 52-58. Sillitoe surveys seven Mormon novels and finds that in only one, *The Evening and the Morning*, does the female protagonist emerge whole. In all of the other works, including two others by Sorensen, the women are dead, mad, outcast, withered, or wounded by the time the book ends. Sillitoe concludes that the reader is not encouraged to question, resist, love excessively or wrongly, or rebel.

<sup>23</sup>William O. Nelson, "To Prepare a People," *Ensign*, January 1979, 19.

<sup>24</sup>See also 4 Nephi 1:3 for another account of a "Zion" community that existed on the American continent in A.D. 36: "And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift" (4 Ne. 1:3).

<sup>25</sup>Nelson, "To Prepare a People," 19.

<sup>26</sup>"Remapping the Moral Domain," 241.

# Sacrifice to the Proper Gods

Jacqueline C. Barnes<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE *PROPER GODS* (1951), one of Virginia Sorensen's less-read novels, was a departure for an author who, up to that point, had written only Mormon historical novels. In Sorensen's dedication she asks, "Has it not become necessary now that each of us try to make conceivable human beings of people who are strangers?" When questioned recently about *The Proper Gods*, she referred to it as "one of my happiest labors." She enjoys rereading this work, because, as she says, "it seems to me, to be not bad writing."<sup>2</sup>

*The Proper Gods*, set in a Yaqui Indian village in north-western Mexico, is about a modernized Yaqui youth, Adan Savala, who having been in the United States Army in World War II, returns to his ancestral village, encounters frustration and culture shock, but eventually finds peace and the promise of fulfillment in traditional Yaqui ways. This process by which Adan restores his soul and finds an anchor are, first, the love shared between him and Micaela, his Yaqui sweetheart; second, the teachings of his grandfather; and third, the gestures and rituals of the ancient ways. Almost literally, Adan dedicates his life in a sacrificial way to what he comes to believe are the proper gods.

Sorensen's treatment of the Indian parallels that of other, perhaps better known writers on Indian topics. Frequently encountered in fiction of the Indian is the return of the disturbed modernized Indian to the stability of a traditional Indian world view, a theme seen, for example, in *Laughing Boy* by Oliver Lafarge, *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday, and *Ceremony* by Leslie Silko.

The Yaqui of today, assessed by neighboring Mexicans as fanatically religious, innately warlike, lawless, and hence semi-barbaric, do not appear

notable. It is interesting to learn the circuitous route by which Sorensen discovered an interest in them. Under a Guggenheim fellowship she went to Mexico to research the historical figure, Sam Brannan. Discovering his interests to be only mining, land, and railroads, Sorensen lost interest in him; but as she lived among the Yaqui in 1947, she too became "enamored" of them.<sup>3</sup> In a recent letter Sorensen recalls her emotions of the time, "I felt *complete*. I wanted to stay in Potam forever."<sup>4</sup> Her trunks of research on Brannan still rest in her home in North Carolina. But the novel, *The Proper Gods*, is now a gift to us so that we may value and empathize with those of another culture.

Another factor in her change of interest was her meeting anthropologists Edward and Rosamond Spicer. The Spicers lived in various Yaqui communities for purposes of study in 1936-37, 1941-42, 1947, and 1970. Educated at the University of Arizona and the University of Chicago, Edward Spicer authored many anthropological books, two on the Yaqui: *Potam: A Yaqui Village in Sonora* and *The Yaquis: A Cultural History*.

A brief history derived from these books aids understanding of the culture dealt with in *The Proper Gods*. In 1617, the Spanish Jesuits came to the area now known as Sonora, Mexico. The inhabitants, who called themselves "The People," were later known to the Spanish as the Yaqui Indians. The Jesuit priest, DeRibas, referred to them in admiration as the "most barbarous people of the new world."<sup>5</sup> The Spanish viewed the Yaqui as having a religion of the devil, which must be dispelled by teaching truths.

Eschewing military conquest, the Spanish allowed a preparatory period of seven years, a period of vitalization and unusual creativity, in which the

Yaqui took the initiative and set the conditions for the relationship.<sup>6</sup> In seven years, by 1623, the Jesuits had baptized 30,000 Yaqui and built eight churches which became the centers for settlement. The reason for the Jesuit success was that the Yaqui remained an unconquered people, motivated by a "deep interest in new and remarkable things."<sup>7</sup> The Yaqui embraced Catholicism, its rituals and pagantry and synthesized it with their own ancient religion. The result was not only a new religion but also a new culture. In the time period treated in *The Proper Gods*, the Yaqui have been invaded much as Great Britain invaded Ireland. The tension between the Mexican and the Yaqui is no less fierce, with the last battle occurring barely two decades earlier in 1926. Now there exists a precarious peace in which the Mexicans respect the warriorship of the Yaqui. To the present, a modern Yaqui shaman claims, "All Yaqui are warriors. We have defeated all conquerors."<sup>8</sup> The Yaqui fervor existed because they fought not merely for fertile, productive land. They gave their lives for the divine source of power inherent in the land—land that nurtured sacred rites and events.<sup>9</sup>

Sorensen's novel, set in the late 1940s, centers on Adan Savala's creation of a bond with his people, a theme common to much of Sorensen's other writings. Mary Bradford notes in a *Dialogue* essay that Sorensen portrays the Yaqui as a society which, like the Mormons and the Amish about whom Sorensen also writes, has preserved an extreme individualism and isolation. Portraying the relationship of individuals to such societies, Sorensen frequently returns thematically to "the need to belong, the sense of belonging in a church, in a place, in a heart."<sup>10</sup>

This theme is worked out in *The Proper Gods* through Adan's original feelings of being fragmented and in his eventual restoration to wholeness.

Alienated from himself and disillusioned with the American society to which he has been exposed while serving in the U. S. Army during World War II, Adan Savala remains alone in Los Angeles, away from his family. His discomfort forces him to "constantly split himself apart to keep himself company, his heart making chatter in all the languages he knew

while his head stood patiently above trying to make sense of the whole business."<sup>11</sup> Hospitalized for the serious illness caused by this fragmentation, Adan sees a vision of Salvador Maestro Himself (Jesus Christ) when the priests arrive to administer last rites. During this vision Adan promises that, if he recovers his health, he will return home and give religious service.

At this same time, his mother in Mexico experiences a similar vision and relates it to her village, a source of pride to the family. Adan had been raised in Pascu, Arizona. Historically this Yaqui community, in Arizona, had been established after the Mexican expulsion and extermination of many Yaqui from their ancient homeland, the seven sacred cities in Sonora, Mexico. During his stay in the army, Adan's parents, sisters, and grandfather had moved to their ancient homeland, Potam, one of the seven sacred cities, in north-western Mexico. Adan will be whole again only when grounded securely in an ancient community. He longs to go home; yet when he arrives, he feels shame at the poverty and distinct prejudice of the Mexicans directed at his people. Still, immediately upon returning, Adan feels a healing and a restoration to himself. Sorensen poetically evokes the feeling of safety upon his homecoming. "Now there was an enclosure into which one came and none were permitted to follow. . . . He stood upon sacred land at last. . . . He felt like a man for a change" (27, 29).

Soon Adan and Micaela, the mayor's beautiful daughter, fall in love. Sorensen describes their perfect understanding,

*For the joy existed in him now and he had not yet possessed Micaela. Love was a kind of truth, acknowledged between them, and it had been there before names were named and before they had spoken a dozen words together. It was like a color or sound, intangible and yet real, and only two in many had it together. (100)*

Of course Adan and Micaela have obstacles to overcome. They must follow conventions of courtship so that their love will be sanctioned by the pueblo. But as Adan watches his sister braid her

long, dark hair one night, he envisions Micaela's fingers doing the same thing with his very life. He envisions himself pulled willingly into the community, as if "every motion involved him as if he too were being bound somehow, twisted in and out" (68).

Adan is also exposed to the influence of his aging grandfather, Achai, the venerable pueblo leader, who relies upon the ancient ways and attempts to teach them to his grandson. Achai possesses wisdom learned by making sacrifices and conquering hardship. Born in Potam, at age twelve Achai watched as Mexican soldiers shot his father. He relates the incident to Adan saying,

*I came close to him. . . . He did not speak to me, but only lay in his blood. . . . Since then . . . I have told myself many times that when I came here and corn grew in this field, it would contain the very blood of my father. (81)*

When Achai watches as his son and grandson work "the good soil wet with his father's blood" (81), a circle has been completed. First the ancient ones toiled here; then they were expelled; now the successors return to cultivate once more the soil sanctified by blood. The edge of the field,

*was a good place for Achai to sit like a Saint in a niche, smiling upon them all. He did not weep now to remember what had happened here. It was as if the members of his household were undoing the old tragedies and he could smile again, telling them how to walk and how to do. (107)*

Achai bravely helped his people resist the Mexicans until his banishment into slavery in the Yucatan. The wounds received during his escape have made him a crippled old man. The effort for Yaqui independence still burns for Achai because as he says, "I was a slave for awhile. . . . I was not hungry. In order that I should be able to work, I was fed very well. . . . It was at that time I learned about hunger" (186). What he hungered for was freedom, homeland, and identity. Though judged by some to be impoverished, Achai possesses a type of wealth, a fulfillment in the simplicity of his religion.

Achai tries to teach a broader view to his grandson, as he recalls, "Having lived to see many changes in the world, sometimes I have seen men so concerned with mastering the ground and the air that they forget even themselves. A man forgets God also when he thinks always of things and never of men" (185). Achai lives spiritually above the encumbered flesh. "Before you and I existed, Adan, we were already very poor. But because of El Señor, we do not think the world is sad" (277). Adan realizes that from Achai's viewpoint "the bleaker the world, the dustier the village, the hungrier he might grow, the harder he labored, the more he believed in the necessity of the existence of his sweet satisfied soul" (277). The greater his deprivation in this life, Achai believes, the greater would be his reward hereafter.

With this idealistic outlook, Achai fights against improvements that would bring progress to the Yaqui and undermine the communal aspect of the culture. He reasons that "Americanos are not happy at all—even those who are most rich. They are rivals, and this never ends with them. . . . They are never satisfied in their lives" (275). The Americans lie with their offer of riches to the Yaqui. "Always they say there is plenty of everything and that they will quickly make the villages rich and our living easy. But they only take away" (206).

This idealism may satisfy an old man; but for Adan, who watches his baby niece struggle with dysentery, a major cause of infant death among the Indians, the comfort lies too far away. He abhors the ignorance which allows these deaths. Achai explains even this: "If they are meant to remain, they are strong. . . . Well, some consider the death of a child a tragedy. It is never a tragedy to die. You say these things because you were not given the Truth" (276). This is a reflection of the Yaquis unitary world view, according to which death is only a slight separation from the sphere of the living.

Adan's cousin, the cynical self-destructive, Sixto, always ready to protest Achai's view, says "Oh, how I hate old men! All in this world should die young. It is a good use for war" (187). Sixto sees Achai's idealism as "a way to keep many men satisfied with nothing. . . . Here is a wise old man whose wisdom would march men backward" (185).

Sixto, familiar with the ways of the Americans represents both a tempter and an antagonist to Adan. Sorensen uses Sixto's character to voice many of the challenges facing the Indian. Expressing all of the negative aspects of remaining in this stagnant culture, Sixto's hostile attitude shatters Adan's initial contentment. Adan and Sixto debate the Yaqui insistence on using ancient ways of farming; grubbing with hoes, hauling water by hand, and harvesting by hand. The Yaqui reject the offer by the Mexicans to use their machinery and justify this by the belief that reliance on machinery detracts from self-reliance and reliance upon God.

Sixto also represents the social issue of alcohol dependency among Indians. Sixto, often "sprawled in a disgusting mess like any drunk," enjoys intoxication, and describes it as beautiful to slide "from color to color like a lizard on a rainbow," rationalizing that "when you wake you are already on the ground, in the mud, and then have only the bother of figuring a way to get up again" (145, 192). Ironically the religious ceremonies of the Yaqui reinforce Sixto in his drunkenness. Sixto once said of it, "Some spend all for a binge, as they say, others all for a fiesta. The drinking, thanks to all Saints is the same either way" (133).

Adan escapes Sixto's dependence upon alcohol through embracing the ancient rituals. He sees life as

*an endless procession. A formal procession and one knew what to do, what to say, where to be at a certain time, and where one stood in the long procession which wound from The Beginning to The Now, endlessly, and into the future beside, through the chanting marching sitting standing. . . . The ritual of going protected; the ritual of arriving again was a gratefulness; the whole ritual of speaking and walking and eating and drinking and touching one another was a protection for the pueblo. And all this time in the air was a constant hovering of approval or disapproval! (179)*

Established rituals protect the people because they give them certainty, identity, and purpose. At times, however, Adan, feels oppressed and restricted by their demands. When he is irresolute, on another occasion, the very lack of the ritual supplies him with an insight. Bringing in a long-awaited harvest he thinks:

*It used to be there was a ceremony for harvest. Thank God, at least one ceremony had been abandoned. . . . Yet he wondered. . . . If one carried these squashes in a procession instead of heaped together on Molonko's old wagon, would they not become something else in the mind, something better than squashes? A procession was color laid upon the dust like paint on an old wall. . . . Perhaps without the rituals also, coming would be nothing, going nothing, birth nothing, death nothing, marriage nothing. . . . Were those others then, those who made the ceremonies in the beginning, trying to make something of the emptiness of their lives? (180)*

As the religious Yaqui experience and remember the change and disruptions of their life, their ceremonies are like the "permanence of a sword pinning all the changing together" (278). In short, Sorensen portrays the ancient rituals as the cement which makes their life coherent and meaningful.

Adan's initiation to Yaqui ritual culminates in the village's annual celebration of Easter. Wachma, the Yaqui fiesta of Lent, prepares for Easter in a lengthy, laborious way. Sorensen used this most important fiesta to mirror the importance of the eventual decisions reached by Adan. Incidentally, Edward Spicer documents the observance of Wachma as late as the 1970s as an elaborate morality play in which evil was made visible by actors, or chapayeka, in an allegory devoted to "the triumph of the Yaqui social, political, and ecclesiastical institution."<sup>12</sup>

Young masked chapayeka represent the evil forces of Judas, the betrayer of Christ. They pretend to take over the town during Wachma but will be destroyed by the good forces of Jesus on Earth. Adan becomes one of the chapayeka to comply with his manda, the promise he made during the vision he had at the novel's beginning. The leader of the chapayeka instructs Adan,

*During the Time of Sorrows we are the evil ones, the Judases, and all we do is done to teach the people the sorrows of Our Lord when He was here. . . . We are not only governors; we are the servants of the pueblo." (212)*

Adan's duties are to supply wood and make physical preparations for Wachma. Ironically, he helps hew the logs which are made into stocks, ready to

punish those who violate the sacredness of the fiesta. Unfortunately, he himself violates that sacredness by laboring at a forbidden moment. He learns that his meager crop is withering and spends the night carrying water in cans to the wheat. Discovered in this breach of law, he is put into the very stocks he helped to build.

Adan's suffering in the stocks parallels Easter when Christ is crucified and entombed for three days. This atonement in the stocks makes Adan worthy to eventually dedicate himself to the pueblo. In a three-day devotion to honor Christ's victory over death, the pueblo marches in a procession to the stations of the cross. Adan uses the time to bitterly examine whether he will leave or stay in Potam. Punished in a barbaric way for trying to advance himself and make a good marriage, he decides to abandon the attempt to accommodate himself to his native culture. The indictment by Sixto appears to be true:

*We Yaqui keep each other poor! With such a system of obligations and fiestas, there is no way for a man to get what he needs in this world. A little money would bring water and light . . . but [instead] it must all go for fiestas. . . . Yaquis try to keep themselves from having anything good in this world. One does not eat ceremonies. (178, 225)*

However, Adan eventually reverses this negative decision. For one thing, the humiliation he suffered in the stocks gives the Yaqui ceremony deeper meaning to him. He gains empathy into the actual suffering of Christ, telling his sister that Christ endured "terrible suffering, My God, I have been thinking here—with nails besides" (247). Sorensen has Adan's sister relate a consoling myth from Yaqui folklore. When Mary learned her son would be crucified, "she became a tree and the cross was made from herself then, and He became a little child and ascended straight to heaven out of her arms" (247).

The culmination of the forty-day celebration of Lent is the point in the procession where the statue of Mary meets the image of Christ. Sorensen makes us feel a catharsis with Adan at this moment as, from the stocks, he feels an irresistible "lifting of

his heart" (266). The ritual signifies an affirmation that, just as Christ is resurrected, so "every man could become whole out of his own sufferings" (278).

*The drama reminds Adan that "there had been wickedness for a long time, but now it is over and there is good. Out of the sadness comes all this happiness. . . . The Image of Jesus, the Curer—the one who had taught all men the way good could be made out of evil and death could spring into life again. (266)*

The reenactment establishes continuity in the lives of the worshippers and demonstrates the result of their penance—eternal life and victory over death.

For the moment Adan believes himself determined to forsake Potam. Upon his release from the stocks, he must perform more service for the conclusion of the fiesta. He does this contemptuously and in a perfunctory manner, though he also demonstrates some humility, because he still seeks the approval of his grandfather.

Micaela understands his anger and agrees to leave after the wheat harvest. He condemns the old ways and sees the lack of progress as "years of Yaqui tragedy, and these poor people standing still doing the same things in the same ways were like men caught in a whirlpool and still crying out that they would not move" (265).

During the harvest, Adan becomes impatient when Achai, his dying grandfather, insists upon being carried to the field. Too late, Adan understands that Achai has returned to die in the field of his father's death. Achai's seasonable death proves a catalyst to alter Adan's plans. Adan begins to comprehend that he intuitively possesses the wisdom of his ancestors, waking to his desire to oversee the extensive ritual surrounding a burial. "His mind was beginning to work again, not in those great flashes full of pain and shame, but in minute ways, concerned with the need of a proper funeral" (283). As Adan takes on this duty before the tribal council,

*the ritual flowed from him like rain from the sky. . . . He felt as if Achai whispered in his ear what it was proper for him to say. When he paused, it seemed that he listened, and yet it was from his heart, not*

*outside himself. He spoke to the loud steady beating of his own heart as he repeated once more the ritual.*  
(306)

At the end of the novel, Adan is healed by his acceptance of the constructive elements in his ancestral traditions. The traditions which made his ancestors an enduring people help Adan make retribution for his own failings and, in part, for the wrongs done by others against his people. Now worthy of divine direction, Adam experiences, as Sorensen foreshadowed earlier, the "final and beautiful thing" (61) that happens to a man when he achieves a meaningful purpose for his life. That final and beautiful thing ends his angry pondering. Adan responds like one prepared for his calling, like a field with channels laid deep to receive the rain when it came (302), channels dug deep by Achai within Adan for when the need of his leadership arose. Adan relinquishes the struggle and "the poor little ease of being only himself" (298). He declares, "I will learn no other words for my living. I know what it is to breathe—here, this very air is mine" (292). This ultimate acceptance transforms him to a oneness with himself, Micaela, and the ancient ones.

In summary, we have seen in *The Proper Gods* a successful treatment of an important theme in modern Indian literature: the healing of a troubled modernized Indian youth by an acceptance of the equilibrium of his ancestral traditions. This theme relates closely to a larger, more inclusive theme common, as Mary Bradford has shown, to much of Sorensen's fiction, the bonding of a character with an intensely individualistic minority society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jacqueline C. Barnes, a native of Utah, served a mission in the New England states. She and her husband, Steven B. Barnes of Kaysville, are the parents of four children. She wrote this paper as part of her English program at Weber State College. She received her degree in June 1991 and currently teaches special education at Bountiful Junior High in Davis County. This paper was delivered at the Association for Mormon Letters annual meeting in January 1989 before Virginia Sorensen's death in December 1991.

<sup>2</sup>Virginia Sorensen, interviewed 17 October 1988.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Virginia Sorensen, Letter to Jacqueline C. Barnes, 24 January 1989.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Spicer, *The Yaquis: A Cultural History* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1980), 13.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ross S. Bennet, ed., *Lost Empires: Living Tribes* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1982), 152.

<sup>9</sup>Spicer, *The Yaquis*, 362.

<sup>10</sup>Mary L. Bradford, "Virginia Sorensen: A Saving Remnant," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1969, 71.

<sup>11</sup>Virginia Sorensen, *The Proper Gods* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 3. Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>12</sup>Spicer, *The Yaqui*, 71.



# In Search of Women's Language and Feminist Expression Among Nauvoo Wives in *A Little Lower Than the Angels*

Helynne H. Hansen<sup>1</sup>

VIRGINIA SORENSSEN'S 1942 NOVEL, *A Little Lower than the Angels*, is a colorful, straight forward look at the Mormon experience during the four to five years in Nauvoo before the exodus West. A careful reading beyond the historical aspects of the text also reveals a novel that is seeking a phenomenon as yet unnamed in the 1940s—that of *écriture féminine*, or a means of expression that is uniquely women's own.

Sorensen depicts through several different female protagonists in the novel the determined but ultimately frustrated search for a specific sort of language through which women can express themselves and discuss problems and emotions, both emotional and spiritual, that affect women in a way in which they could not possibly affect men.

Although the narration is shared from the point of view of numerous characters, fictional and non-fictional, male and female, including the Prophet Joseph Smith, the most touching and passionate narrative views are from the women characters, most notably Mercy Baker and the poetess Eliza R. Snow. The novel is several decades in advance of the phenomenon of feminist literary criticism (beginning ca. 1968) that urges casting off male discourse in favor of *gynesis*—a newly developed language that is conceived and expressed purely according to the women's history and women's experience.

Bits and pieces of women's thought and dialogue fall into place as *A Little Lower than the Angels* unfolds, and the Mormon women strive to express themselves according to the tumultuous and often violent history that is being made around them, despite its emotional upheavals that invade the very core of their personal lives.

The novel opens with Mercy Baker, newly arrived in Nauvoo, and not yet baptized into the Church, reflecting on her contentment with the special closeness she feels to her husband, Simon. "All the little things that made him Simon and nobody else, they were mighty important. The one Simon."<sup>2</sup>

The narrator reveals that Mercy keeps a likeness of herself in her Bible at the story of Leah. This expression of Mercy's perception of the beauty of her monogamous marriage and her place as first wife sets up an ambiance of contentment and peace that creates an effective tension with the completely different philosophy on marriage that will soon be thrust upon her, and explained away in terse, condescending, and totally male terminology.

Ann Rosalind Jones wrote in 1981 that Western culture has always been phallogocentric, and therefore, fundamentally oppressive, towards women. Such oppression is particularly evident in traditional language, which Jones describes as "another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else—including women." Therefore women have typically written as "hysterics, as outsiders to male-dominated discourse."<sup>3</sup>

This involuntary and crippling genuflecting by women writers to male language was not being identified in the 1940s. Nonetheless, Sorensen is acutely in tune with her female characters' sentiments, and with their verbal struggle to make sense out of the Nauvoo experience, which was all but monopolized by male discourse. In *A Little Lower than the Angels*, early Mormon wives sought to articulate certain female experiences—polygamy, in particular—in strictly and uniquely feminine terms. The

women's dialogue with the men and with one another, as well as their actions during the years leading up to the Utah exodus, all indicate that Sorensen was very much aware of the spirit of gynesis or, at the least, painfully aware of a lack of feminist expression during the 1840s and of how hurtful and destructive this lack proved to be in the lives of the most faithful of Mormon women.

This study will seek to identify in *A Little Lower than the Angels* the numerous examples of women thirsting and groping for an accurate, sensitive way to express themselves according to their own sense of their terrestrial selves and what they understand and believe to be their divine destiny. The struggle is neither easy nor successful for Nauvoo women. In many instances, one perceives the female characters, as Jones notes, striving to express their feelings and needs according to the strictly male terminology with which they have always been taught.

Through her female characters Sorensen is straining for a yet-unidentified mode of female expression. She is, as contemporary feminist critic Charlotte Hogsett describes it, "chafing at the restrictions placed on women writers, tapping along the walls (of male language and expression) in search of a way out."<sup>24</sup> Sorensen is also aware of the male tendency to use and twist traditional male language and clichés to dismiss women's protests and to achieve their own ends.

The narrator notes that Nauvoo women and youths, many of whom love poetry, have been warned (by their fathers and husbands) against the works of certain English poets, since, in the words of Simon Baker, "that man Byron was notably wicked; and Shelley, a deserter of wife and children" (116).

Ironically, the Prophet Joseph Smith woos Eliza R. Snow into a polygamous marriage with a few lines from Shelley's inflammatory poem *Epipsychidion*:

*I never was attached to that great sect,  
Whose doctrine is, that each one should select  
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,  
And all the rest, through fair and wise, commend  
To cold oblivion, though it is in the code  
Of modern morals, that the beaten road . . .* (90)

Although *Epipsychidion* is described by Shelley scholars as "the most outspoken and eloquent appeal for free love in the language,"<sup>25</sup> it would appear that the words of Shelley, as radical and anti-Victorian as they may be, can become useful male language to achieve male purposes, even in Nauvoo. For certain goals and projects of Mormon men, Shelley's words can be cleverly interpreted to sound heavensent. "It seems to me that [Shelley] was inspired to write this poem," the prophet tells Eliza, "just the way I'm inspired to write my revelations" (90). In contrast to this perhaps self-serving statement, Snow experiences a genuine epiphany in comprehending the existence of a Mother in Heaven in Sorensen's sensitive, semi-fictionalized rendering of her writing the hymn "O My Father."

Sorensen employs a combination of third person narration and free indirect style to create Eliza's thoughts and to describe her feelings when her poem is complete:

*She was terribly excited, and her body was blazing with something besides the heat of the day. I have made something, I have made something; if you make something from what you believe, then the blessing of belief can never leave you. I have something to show [Joseph] that he will like. (129)*

However, when Eliza seeks out the prophet in excited haste to share the poem and its new idea with him, he is preoccupied and anxious to send her on her way. He is well-meaning, like other men of the community, but painfully out of tune with a woman's striving for an expression and explanation of her own place in the Church and in life's eternal plan.

Nowhere in the novel is the contrast between self-serving male language and a lack of viable female language so evident as in the attempts to explain and to justify the practice of polygamy as vital, not only to the building up of the kingdom of God on earth, but also to the individual life-styles of men and women alike.

Joseph Smith's eloquence in explaining the divine nature of polygamy to Eliza is dramatically undercut by Eliza's sincere desire but complete inability to repeat his explanations convincingly to Mercy. Here the interpretation of the words of

Shelley and the logic of the spiritual ideas as described by the prophet suddenly ring hollow. As two women now discuss the idea, not only do the words fall flat, but they barely come at all.

"I wish I could tell you just the way he told it to me," Eliza tells Mercy. "The most beautiful— She spoke with unsteady lips and a shaking chin" (104). Eliza fumbles to recreate Joseph's exalted explanation for a higher order. "He tells you how it is and you see it differently, you forget about this world, and all you think about is the spiritual thing—about heaven" (107).

Mercy, however, can only see the worldly (and the male) aspects in the plan. "The human side of the whole thing, this side eternity," and she hopes the new idea won't get around. "You give men an idea like that and they'll all start looking around" (106).

As polygamy takes an increasingly stronger hold in the community, male efforts to justify the practice and the difficulties that inevitably surround it intensify. On the evening after Eliza has written "O My Father," the prophet tells his "little Eliza-wife" that he will visit her "when the moon is in the quarter" (142-43). Months later, after the party celebrating the finishing of Joseph and Emma's Mansion House, Eliza upbraids the prophet for not keeping his promise:

*"Joseph—you said when the moon is in the quarter —  
"Well," he said brusquely, "it isn't."  
Eliza's voice turns "steely sober" as she reminds him.  
"No, it isn't in the quarter now, but it has been.  
Three—four times—since that last night. And if  
I'm your wife, as I hope in the name of God I am, you  
owe me at least a quarter-moon. Not a whole one,  
I'm not asking that, but a quarter."* (170)

Hogsett noted in 1987:

*[Woman] is a secondary being who depends on the male mind for her existence. Every word she speaks travels out of her contingent place, its route to the listener inevitably indirect, distorted. The primary, fundamental role belongs to man. It is he who substantiates, who defines, who decides on and imposes meanings. He insists that she function in his world, where he has established the links between signifier and signified.<sup>6</sup>*

Sorensen's women are slowly beginning to realize that they are being manipulated and put off by men's choice of metaphors and pretty expressions that may placate the wives for awhile, but which quickly turn out to be a mere means of sidestepping real communication, as well as a coverup for the full spectrum of men's true intentions.

A moving attempt to achieve a strictly female mode of expression for a heart-rending emotional situation comes midway through the novel from Melissa Vermazon, who has lost all four of her children to disease within the past few years. After the birth of Mercy's twins, Melissa inexplicably appears at the window of the Baker home, wishing to comfort the crying toddler-daughter, Beck, with the simple words, "Darling, Darling!"

Her pathetic expression of hurt, emptiness, and the need to still give some measure of maternal comfort become a small legend among Nauvoo women. The unknown whisperer of soothing words from the window becomes known in the female community simply as "the Darling Lady." While some women try to explain the mysterious voice as the spirit of the martyred Prophet come to watch over the settlements, "the men, who had learned to sleep whether babies cried or not, thought the whole tale as a woman-thing, a fabrication, and simply let it be" (249).

Thus, even the most rudimentary attempts of Nauvoo women to express themselves in purely feminine discourse, tend to be written off by men as nonsense, while the women continue to search for and to hurt over the lack of an emotional and verbal language of their own.

When the matter of polygamy arises in the Baker home, the principle is explained and analyzed by Mercy, Eliza and other woman friends, but always according to male language—that is, the reasonable, logical justifications of the doctrine that come directly from the prophets (first from Joseph Smith, then from Brigham Young), and from Simon Baker's second-hand explanations. As Sorensen describes the women's struggle to make sense out of a practice that is putting their everyday lives in constant turmoil and wrenching them emotionally, the lack of a viable feminist expression becomes even more clear.

It is interesting to observe also that Charlot Leavitt, who is, in reality, one of the most admirable of all the women in the novel (she is intelligent, resourceful, creative, unselfish, compromising, and forbearing, among other qualities) comes off badly in the narrative simply because she is Simon's polygamous wife, and therefore, an interloper and a spoiler. Although there is no female language than can justify her troublesome presence in the Baker household, there is more than adequate male verbiage to make her position seem natural.

Brigham Young encourages Simon's second marriage with painstakingly logical phrases:

*Now, that's what Brother Joseph said about it. He was thinking of men like you when he wrote that and of women like your wife. And he was thinking of women who love children and houses and don't have any of their own to take care of. And he planned it for men who were strong-minded, not for men who wanted a thing that's the least part of a woman. . . . If a man lives this principle as it should be lived, he learns to be impartial, like God. And women learn to be unselfish, they learn what's the best and the most important part of marriage, giving and sharing. That's the best part of any life, Brother Baker. (283-85)*

After the death of Joseph Smith, Eliza tries gamely to continue his justification of polygamy, telling Mercy, "If you're big enough, you can climb up in the middle of the fence, and look at both sides. You don't have to sit and growl over what's on your side like the old dog in the manger!" (269).

Prior to that, however, after the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum had come home in the wagon, the narrator shows Eliza thinking to herself, "If I should die first, if I should go on before any of them, then I would be the only one for a little while. I'd be the only one until she came, and the others" (241). Sorensen manages to show subtly how Eliza, despite her outward male-originated attempt to explain polygamy, thinks of her marriage musingly, semi-consciously, in an entirely different way. In the privacy of her own mind, to which Sorensen allows us access, the fictional Eliza sees her union with the prophet ideally in monogamous terms, however briefly.

Also, as Mercy discusses polygamy with Portia Glazier, she recalls the reference to the dog in the manger, and muses, "Only, Portia, it always seemed to me that there was something to the dog's side of it. A property right, really. Maybe the straw kept him warm even though he couldn't eat it" (344). Thus, a piece of male language has been gently turned about and questioned without being defied.

In the midst of the constant bickering and unhappiness in the Baker household, Simon turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to the very real difficulties and persists in viewing the situation in male terms only. He refuses to let Charlot leave the family home and return to her own house in town. Simon thinks:

*He must not be the first one to fail, or the second even, or the last. . . . The blessed were those who bore the burden in the heat of the day. . . . Why should love alone be allowed selfishness? For a man it is even unnatural—did not most men cast their eyes on many women, suffering under their instincts and the burden of the other commandment? And did God smile on the rows of woman-bodies, unused and lonely. . . . Before the first terrible misstep, a simple ceremony that gave sanction and invested pleasure with responsibility. It seemed a simple solution. (332-33)*

Simon mouths such justifications continually to his wives, promising, as did Brother Joseph, eventual "world harmony, world perfection" (334). Mercy, however, knows that the pat, male phrases are impotent against the hurt and indignation of everyday reality. "You can hold up a penny," Mercy thought, "and it will hide the sun" (334). Such verbalized female insights are few, however.

There is virtually no language that either Mercy or Charlot can employ that will assuage the pain or temper the emotional chaos that Charlot's mere presence brings to the home. Although Charlot runs the Baker home with cheer and uncommon efficiency, Mercy is driven to mute rage by Charlot's very presence, the older Baker children detest and defy her, and we the readers also resent her. In the midst of this unfortunate swirl of bad feeling, Sorensen herself does nothing to calm the storm. The readers observe the unhappiness in the household cinemagraphically—through dialogue and incidents. There is little prob-

ing into the women's minds except a brief note that Mercy calls this time the Era of Man's Patience (abbreviated E.M.P.) in her journal. Simon admires this reference, but the sensitive oldest son, Jarvie, knows that this is not really his mother's true self (340).

Thus, the words and thoughts of the women themselves present no indications that women can actually come to understand and accept polygamy because of their husbands' rote explanations. Sorensen's paucity of revealing female discourse here indicates that the polygamous family situation can be neither explained nor justified, nor even tolerated, if approached through women's language.

Thus, Sorensen begins in the last few chapters of the novel to employ a tactic that is traditionally a pathetic, although ultimately effective technique of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women to express themselves in a world of men's rules and men's language—the technique of *silence*.

"No one questioned the authoritative way in which a man could write [in the nineteenth-century]. He shaped the world," noted Michelle Stott in a recent symposium address at Brigham Young University.

*Women was the Other. She couldn't shape, criticize, or speak in a voice of authority. Therefore, she used the strategies of self-effacement and self-deprecation that would direct irony inward and against herself. Her silences, omissions, and self-protective rhetorical devices were meant to conceal and yet to reveal.<sup>7</sup>*

When Mercy Baker falls into an inexplicable illness toward the end of the novel, her situation becomes another dimension of this strange, yet effective oxymoron—a woman's expressive silence. The narrator and dialogue provide no fully satisfactory physical reason for Mercy's confinement to her bed. True, she had a tendency toward weakness, and the recovery from each birth takes longer and longer. However, she has recovered from the twins' birth and from the death of tiny Mary, and is up and about when she discovers the secret of Simon's second marriage to the woman whom she had been led to believe was hired help.

When Simon awkwardly tries to explain, again with the same male platitudes, Mercy realizes there is no woman's viewpoint he will tolerate from her. "He hates woman-emotion, uncurbed and hysterical; he's like other men, he gets out of the room before it, he shuns it, embarrassed" (322). All attempts at explanation, at verbalization from a woman's point of view are void. Mercy's silence now is her only weapon.

There is an interlude of several months between Mercy's recovery from the twins' birth, and the collapse that leaves her an invalid. During this time, the two wives can communicate only in terms of their disagreements over household chores and habits—"a waffle iron on a different hook . . . the plates piled in a different corner of the cupboard" (329). Complaints to Simon are cut short by the usual references to the doctrine of practicing "unnatural unselfishness" (333). However, what he says only serves to "stifle her words, not her feelings" (335).

The wives' efforts to understand and accept their situation through male language is consistently undercut by a deep and festering silence, a rage that goes unarticulated, but which is manifest in indirect ways—such as their power struggle within the kitchen and their vying for the children's love and favor.

It is evident from the narrative that the true cause of Mercy's final illness is her inability to express her real feelings, her linguistic incapacity in the face of male prejudice and male language. Because Mercy is unable to verbalize her emotions, she is ultimately unable to cope. Her sickness has no apparent physical cause, yet the narrator eventually tells us she is, "sick at heart" (370), and Portia Glazier observes that Mercy's spells "are in the mind, not only in the body" (417).

When the Baker home is burned by persecutors and the family must move into Charlot's house, the silence intensifies. Mercy withdraws increasingly into herself; she and Charlot rarely speak. "Neither thought to find a way around their feelings; some things are not spoken" (381).

That her sickness is psychosomatic is evident as Mercy seems miraculously able to arise from her sickbed and sit by Simon's side as the wagons leave

Nauvoo. However, as she looks across the river to the bluff and sees the site of the home where she was once happy as a monogamous wife, the image and the emotions are too much. There is no way, no language to express her feelings as woman, to articulate her sentiments of betrayal and loss; and there on the wagon seat, Mercy slumps forward and dies.

"Masculine society has traditionally repressed woman's voice," says French feminist critic Hélène Cixous. "Writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence, political, typically masculine—economy . . . where woman has never had her turn to speak." In this 1975 essay, Cixous boldly proclaims, "It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. . . . Women should break out of the snare of silence."<sup>8</sup>

In 1942, Sorensen lacked the terminology and the tight sisterhood of modern feminist writers which would allow her to break out of this snare by verbalizing precisely what polygamous wives were facing in Nauvoo. From a historical point of view, Sorensen is aware that the Mormon women of the 1840s lacked any method of explaining to themselves or to one another their sentiments and perceptions about their bewildering new situation. Feminist language was simply a phenomenon which could not be expected to develop in their era.

Feminist writers and critics of the late twentieth century are able to bolster and sustain one another in growing confidence and solidarity. However, this kind of sisterhood, as it existed in Nauvoo, only diminished under the onslaught of polygamy, the ensuing difficulties of expression, and the eventual silences among women in the 1840s.

An early chapter of *A Little Lower than the Angels* shows a gathering of Nauvoo women at a quilting bee where Mercy is happy to learn that they can discuss together with ease anything from domestic concerns to sexual matters (38). However, as the novel progresses, we see such sisterhood unraveling. Some good feelings among the women remain, but the erosion is evident as one realizes that, at the novel's beginning, Emma Smith and Eliza R. Snow were close friends and confidantes. Also, it is logical that, under different circumstances, Mercy and Charlot might have easily been friends as well. In the course of the story,

however, polygamy has taken enough of a toll on female solidarity in Nauvoo to scotch much development of common, sisterly expression and communication.

There is, therefore, some truth in Cixous's assertion that "almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Sorensen's perceptions of the lack of a female mode of expression is made clear in her novel through her creative, varied narration and dialogues. Effective also is her method of backing away at times to let the story tell itself cinemagraphically, thereby letting the characters' difficulties and silences represent their lack of language on a personal level. Sorensen's novel, therefore, is an effort towards a strictly female mode of expression that begs departure from accepted 1940s norms of thought and verbalization.

In short, in Sorensen's novel, Nauvoo women struggle gamely for self-understanding and self-expression through the restrictions of men's explanations, men's stereotypes, men's clichés, and traditional male language. Their success is limited and their concept of the individual female self and her role in an unusual society is bewildering. We readers are left vaguely unsatisfied and disappointed in the women's inability to protest and to cope.

Nevertheless, Sorensen's creativity in allowing readers to see the true sentiments and perceptions beneath the surface of male-dominated doctrines, and beyond the silences of courageous women is an early foray into the now-prolific realm of feminist language and expression.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Helynn H. Hansen is an assistant professor of French at Western State College of Colorado, and a former visiting assistant professor of French at Brigham Young University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Utah. This paper was delivered at the conjoint session of the Association for Mormon Letters and the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, 17 October 1992, at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

<sup>2</sup>Virginia Sorensen. *A Little Lower than the Angels*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 5. Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>3</sup>Ann Rosalind Jones. "Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 358.

<sup>4</sup>Charlotte Hogsett, *The Literary Existence of Germaine de Staël* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1987), 65.

<sup>5</sup>Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *Modern Critical Views: Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 21.

<sup>6</sup>*The Literary Existence of Germaine de Staël*, 26.

<sup>7</sup>Michelle Stott, "Speaking Silences: Literary Discourse of Nineteenth-Century German Women Authors," Symposium, Department of German and Slavic Languages, Brigham Young University, 6 March 1992; italics mine. Notes in my possession.

<sup>8</sup>Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in Warhol and Herndl, *Feminisms*, 337.

<sup>9</sup>"The Laugh of the Medusa," 342.

# “Little Books” from a Large Soul: The Private Poetry of Virginia Sorensen

Susan Elizabeth Howe<sup>1</sup>

IN AUGUST 1991 SHIRLEY PAXMAN invited me to their cabin in Provo Canyon to visit with Mormon author Virginia Eggertsen Sorensen Waugh, who is also Monroe Paxman's cousin.<sup>2</sup> Virginia was in Utah for what proved to be the last time; she passed away 24 December 1991, two months before her eightieth birthday. That clear summer morning as we all sat on the patio of the Paxmans' Wildwood cabin, watched sunlight play on the stream, and talked, Virginia brought out a box containing sixteen little books she had created, year after year, as gifts for her first husband Fred Sorensen. She gave him the first little book following their engagement in 1933; the second was a wedding present; and she made a new book for him each year from 1933 until 1948, either for his birthday or for their wedding anniversary. What the books contain is Virginia's original poetry and, in the later volumes, excerpts from her fiction. In addition to these books, she also had with her a five-year diary she kept from 1932 to 1936, the years during which she attended Brigham Young University, married, and gave birth to her two children.

That morning, sitting in the sunshine and listening to the stream flow by, as I examined the Little Books, as she called them, and read some of their contents, I had three distinct impressions. The first was that Virginia Sorensen must be a remarkable person. Anyone, I thought, who had the originality to create such gifts—even to conceive of such gifts—must have unusual qualities of imagination and vitality to bring to the living of life.

My second impression was of the value of the books themselves. Each is unique. They vary somewhat in size, but are about 4.5 inches wide and

between five and six inches long. Each year Virginia chose the cover, the decorative end papers to go inside the covers, and the stationery stock for the pages. Some volumes were professionally bound; during the leaner student years Virginia bound the books herself in polished wooden covers held together by leather hinges. One year she arranged to have the whole book typeset at the University of Indiana Press; then she had just a single copy printed. Many of the books were typed on a regular typewriter; others are in calligraphy. She asked artist friends to prepare illustrations for the pages or the cover; one book includes drawings by her son Fred, then ten.

To pick up and examine each of these books was to remember that bookbinding at its best is an art and that a book is a beautiful, important object. For example, the wedding volume, *We Grow More Rich*, is bound in soft black suede, its title imprinted in gold. Before the title page, the illustrations, and the beginning of each section is a sheet of translucent ivory paper patterned with leaves. In contrast, the 1937 volume is bound in red, and the end papers are a muted swirling pattern of red, blue, and brown. The 1946 volume is bound in an orange and turquoise plaid fabric, with turquoise end papers. It was a pleasure to hold these books, and I have since learned that reading the actual books is much more satisfying than reading a transcript of their contents.

But to return to that August morning, my third impression was, I'm afraid, that of a greedy and self-serving academic: at that moment I felt I was as close as I was ever likely to come to being the discoverer of a famous author's unknown manuscript.<sup>3</sup> As I skimmed the poetry, I thought some of it very



good. I was particularly attracted to the poems that portrayed daily experience from the perspective of a stay-at-home wife and mother, a perspective that has been largely omitted from poetic consideration. I was eager to study these books in more detail.

The eventual outcome of our August meeting was that Virginia Sorensen made these Little Books available for future scholarship. I applied for a grant from the Women's Research Institute at Brigham Young University and was awarded funds to prepare a typescript copy of the books, which will soon be placed in the Harold B. Lee Library on the BYU campus for researchers; the books themselves are too delicate to be handled by many readers. Valerie Holladay has done excellent work in preparing the typescript, taking scrupulous care to reproduce exactly the format and contents of each of the little books, down to and including the composition of each page and even its typographical errors. She also saw the manuscript through proofreading, with the assistance of Linda Hunter Adams's editing classes at BYU. As to the final disposition of the Little Books themselves, before her death Virginia Sorensen donated them to *Exponent II*, the Mormon women's quarterly newspaper, and *Exponent II* hopes to place them on loan to the Lee Library at BYU and provide a case for their permanent display.

As I have studied the contents of these Little Books over the past several months, my sense of their value has grown considerably. They will be a very useful resource for anyone who wants to study Virginia Sorensen's writing or her life. Her development as a writer is evident in their pages, as the poems become more sophisticated and less predictable in the later volumes. The excellent dramatic poems, those in which a persona other than Virginia is a speaker, show her natural affinity to fictional material. The verse drama Virginia wrote in a course she took from Yvor Winters, *The Hungry Moon*, is one of the best works featured in the Little Books, and this artistic re-creation of the legend of Timpanogos deserves further scholarship as well as dramatic production. Virginia's excellence as a fiction writer is also chronicled as she begins to include prose passages in the later volumes.

But as I initially suggested, I think that the major contribution the Little Books make is to offer a selection of poetry that presents domestic experience from a woman's perspective. These poems chronicle the life that has been lived by many generations of women, particularly Mormon women. Some of the poems are about the hopes of courtship, the dreams and promises of the wedding, but many others also deal with the mundane, the daily, the routine, expressing from the context of settled family life a wife's needs and desires, disappointments and longings.

During the years 1935 and 1936, Fred was studying at Stanford University, and the couple was living in Palo Alto, California. The books for these years include many poems about what it was like to be the wife of a graduate student. In several Virginia waits at home, missing Fred while he is away at school. In one poem she writes:

*All day long my shuddering body feels  
Reverberations of the gates  
You close to me  
When I would be  
The shapeless shadow clinging to your heels  
Rather than this thing that waits! (1935, 66<sup>4</sup>)*

Note the intense longing suggested by the "shuddering body" and the loathing suggested by Virginia's identification of herself as "this thing that waits." Another poem expresses to Fred the difference between how she and he experience the routine of their days. She tells him,

*Your kiss is part of coming and going, like opening  
the door / And turning left or right when a block  
comes to an end. / . . . not less casually you nod to a  
friend, / And pass him the way you leave me here  
alone. (1935, 67)*

His involvement with a larger part of the world results in his being more casual about affection, which becomes increasingly important to Virginia because she is left in the smaller world of her home and relies on Fred as her primary outlet for affection, imagination, and communication.

That she is interested in the larger world is apparent from this untitled poem:

*I often think to contemplate  
Being's tangled threads.  
How odd that some should make the poems  
And some should make the beds,  
But sorrow, no, for tired heads  
Would find it very sad  
If pages full of lines were all  
The solace to be had. (1935, 69)*

Although in this poem Virginia questions the division of labor that assigns her to complete the domestic chores, she finally accepts it because comfort and sustenance are essential to everyone's wellbeing. In step with her time, she does not even consider that the caretaking chores might be shared.

What exactly her work and life consist of is expressed in the poem "Day Piece":

*This is my broomstick;  
This narrow shelf is mine;  
There are my clean clothes  
Drying on the line.*

*Here sleeps a baby  
My lullaby can soothe.  
These are little dresses  
With all the wrinkles smooth.*

*Here is my pantry  
With everything in rows;  
I'm the only one can tell  
Where every saucer goes.*

*Here hot macaroni  
Swims gaily with the cheese,  
And here am I as patient  
As any one of these.*

*Someday I shall wonder  
About the World, I think,  
And hang the dishes on the line,  
The broomstick in the sink,*

*And all the little dresses  
Will languish in a drawer*

*While I set out in the sun,  
While I travel far—*

*And the little lullaby  
Is all that I shall keep  
To wrap my baby pink and warm  
When she falls asleep. (1935, 65)*

In several ways this poem implies that Virginia is something of a witch. The first thing the reader sees is her broomstick, then the narrow shelf that suggests the limitations domesticity imposes on her. That she desires to upset her life by hanging the dishes on the line and leaving the broomstick in the sink hints at disturbing magical powers. She wants to leave, to "travel far," and she dreams that in order to do so, she will be able to care for her baby magically (a desire I imagine most mothers have shared), keeping it warm by simply wrapping it in a lullaby. The poem suggests that the desire for experiences beyond the home is precisely what makes a woman into a witch.

The dailiness of life, a wife's longing for adventure and intellectual stimulation are only some of the aspects of a woman's domestic experience covered in the Little Books. Other poems speak of erotic love, of pregnancy, of the birth of children, and of a mother's involvement in her children's lives. A series of poems titled "Homely Homilies" describes the people Virginia encounters day by day—"The Postman," "Milkman," "Landlord," "Orange Man," and "Rudolf," the butcher.

In addition to chronicling the general experience of generations of housewives, these poems also include insights into the particular experiences of Virginia Sorensen and her family. By looking for similarities in several poems, the careful reader can discover the patterns of joy and pain Fred and Virginia Sorensen, who eventually divorced after many years of marriage, experienced together through the years.

The first volume, *Thus Far*, begins with a rhymed journal of the early days of their courtship. The first entry suggests the reasons for their mutual attraction:

*Invitation*

*At last! A man who seems to see  
Why thought gets all be-stirred in me  
And burst[s] the bounds of real decorum.  
Come in, Fred, to the old sanctorum! (1933a, 1)*

A later poem adds, "He loved me first for being brainy" (1933a, 7). Apparently, Fred was attracted to Virginia precisely because she was witty and intelligent and a serious student, and she was attracted to him because he valued those qualities in her.

After their marriage, Virginia's growing love for Fred and her openness to him, as well as his control of their relationship, are expressed in this short poem:

*Once, someone asked a gift in vain  
And all his begging could not wake me  
To desire. Now, what Power can explain  
Why I am Fred's when he will take me? (1933b, 33)*

The poem "Moments," also from the marriage volume, suggests that, at least in her perception, Virginia needs both Fred's time and his affection more than he needs hers: "Small moments I am his, in very truth and very deed; / Small moments he leans hungrily and satisfies my greed" (1934, 49). The poem also implies that Fred controls when they will share these moments that are so important to Virginia.

As the years pass, many of the family's milestones are remembered in the poems. Virginia writes of her first pregnancy, ". . . I hear life fluttering, yet dim / And lovely, underneath my waiting breast" (1934, 41). In another poem she tells her coming child, "I know you well. What mystery / Are you to one who made your very age, / Who is the half of you herself, and loves / The other half of all your parentage?" (1934, 56).

Other poems describe, for example, baby Beth's perspective of the time a kitten knocked over their Christmas tree and broke all the ornaments. And there is a poem about little Freddie in the bathtub, imagining himself to be first an island and then a boat. The poem "Legend" is important in that it describes every place this academic, wandering couple had lived together—Utah, California, Indi-

ana, Michigan, and Colorado. This poem is particularly fine in its selected observations about each area. The section about Utah, for example, reads:

*In Utah, streets followed the lift of land  
and every window held a mountain  
like a surprising gift.  
Steeple swam in light and nodded to the wide streets,  
permitting life but watchful of it.  
Above, in the sudden hills,  
sage sweetened our fingers and the river thundered  
under a torn moon. (1945, 244)*

Another important group of poems is the series of poems about World War II. These poems appear in several of the volumes and describe the war from many different perspectives. One of the most memorable, "By Letter," is in the voice of "Uncle Jeppa" from Figgen, a Norwegian relative who describes the German invasion of his homeland. The poem says of the Norwegian soldiers:

*When their guns were empty, they came down,  
The young men.  
They held their shoulders together  
And walked in a wall,  
And another and another,  
Road width,  
Down past the waterfalls. (1941, 191)*

The people wept to see them come. Uncle Jeppa describes a young girl, Kirsten, who lets a German soldier kiss her, but "her father, her own, dragged her home by the plaits / He was always so fond of, / Cut them next her skull, / And tossed them like mice to the fire" (1941, 191-92). Another way in which war breeds hatred is presented as the young German soldiers ask the way to Figgen, even politely, and the Norwegian people ignore them:

*We don't hear them,  
Standing still, looking up the road  
Where water still splashes  
As though nothing had happened.  
Excuse me—but there is nothing in the treaty  
Nothing that tells us, Show them the road. (1941, 192)*

Two war poems are about a dead eighteen-year-old soldier, and one describes a woman who learns that her husband has been killed. Another is in the voice of a young soldier who is afraid to go into battle because he wants to live; two are titled "For Women in War-time." As Virginia does so well in her novels, she shows in these poems compassion for all people, regardless of what side they are on, and disdain for the conditions that drive them apart.

This compassion is also apparent as Virginia writes to Fred of their own marriage. Over the years the Little Books speak honestly of the difficulties of their relationship. One of the earliest poems to do so is an untitled poem in the 1935 volume:

*Today was drenched in tears, but dried  
Her petticoats with dusk  
And calmer than the moon no longer  
Does she seek and ask.  
Little tardy kisses  
Cured her wretchedness  
And she shall enter here again  
Clad in her yellow dress. (1935, 61)*

Although the poem is ostensibly about a rainy day, the personification of this day as female suggests that another reading is possible, in which Virginia herself is the unhappy day. It is interesting to note that the cause of her sorrow is not addressed or resolved; the woman or day must simply return to happiness and again appear in her yellow dress.

In later volumes, marital difficulties are expressed more openly. Folded in the 1940 volume is a letter Virginia wrote to Fred on his birthday. It begins,

*Dearest and best,  
Too distressed over the absence of our book, I write  
a strange birthday poem for you. It is, in a way, the  
theme of our despair these last long times. We both  
understand the solution—the blessing of work. So I  
wrote this. (1940, 164)*

The poem is about their commitment to their children and their loss of dreams, in addition to the solace they take from their work. In the 1944 volume, the poem "New Conclusion" describes their

love as "long suspect." It continues, "A wound which has lain / worried with blood, infected, wide, / is closed in peace / and restored among the tissue," and ends by saying they will speak about this pain "with quiet respect / as of the hard and joyless life of one / who has just died" (1944, 226). Because the contents of the Little Books were intended only for Fred, they present an unusually honest and open assessment of Virginia and Fred's marital relationship.

The poems themselves present these personal experiences, but in addition, on at least two occasions (perhaps soon after she got the books back from Fred, and then again in 1978—five months after his death) Virginia reread the Little Books and wrote notes in them about some of the poems. For example, the title of the 1935 volume is *The Little World*, a phrase taken from Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*. Virginia's handwritten note says: "We went over to the U of Calif-Berkeley library & saw this *great book*." The note makes evident that even during these poor student years, Virginia and Fred at least occasionally were able to have an outing together, that they enjoyed such intellectual pursuits as an exhibit of early books, and that Virginia used these outings as a source of discovery and imagination in her own intellectual life.

Two other handwritten notes in *The Little World* are equally poignant. Immediately under the book title, Virginia wrote:

*This title is very suggestive of the limited world of the house & domestic life. We had three rooms & Ma S[orensen] slept in one of them. I would slip out in the night to the kitchen & rock the baby—Ma S. objected to rocking—& her nearness much limited our lovemaking in a squeaky bed. (1935, 59)*

She also wrote inside the front cover:

*I bound this myself, we were so poor—this endpaper was a sheet of Fred's stationery—We were living on \$50 a month that Fred got for teaching a class in Freshman English. Our rent was \$15 a month & we went to Japanese gardens for great buys of good fresh vegetables at 10 cents a bag. A big can of spin-*

*ach was 15 cents. How amazing this seems in 1978!  
The bill for care & delivery of the baby was only  
\$75—& was hard to come by. (1935, 59)*

These notes are scattered throughout the books and are a source of important information explaining both the poems and Virginia's life as she was writing them.

The domestic. The private. The personal. These qualities in the Little Books are what I think will be most important about their use in the future. The project I hope to work on next is to select enough of the personal and domestic poems for a single-volume collection, which I then hope to see through to publication, precisely because we have much to learn about and from ordinary women's experiences, experiences that these poems present so well. But I also see these books as providing many other insights into Sorensen's work. For example, I hope that someone will use the Little Books to examine how Virginia Sorensen constructed herself in poetry intended for her husband, considering the attitudes and roles that were expected of her by her Mormon culture, and also how she resists and breaks out of those roles and subverts those attitudes as the years pass. I think the Little Books can be used to examine the development of her thought about many matters. As I read I noticed that the concept of beauty in life and in art, the relationship of humans to deity, and the way mortal limits constrain us were themes that arose again and again. Another major study might compare the private poems with her published books on these or many other issues.

I should like to conclude with a claim Virginia herself makes in the 1946 volume. One of the prose selections in that book is about Marie, a young girl who is trying to write a poem. She remembers a warning from a young poet who spoke at her school and said that good poetry was never personal. So Marie tries to take the references to herself out of her poem, particularly the line "I am alone." The passage continues:

*She turned her pencil over and rubbed carefully at the last three words, I am alone. But anyway, she thought, I am. She felt rebellious about the young poet. Poems were always about yourself, no matter*

*what they were about, and she knew it. . . . If things were inside of you and not outside at all, how could it be otherwise? (1946, 262, 264)*

In the same way, the poems and prose of the Little Books are about Virginia Sorensen, no matter what else they are about, and can teach us much about her life, her personal trials, her thinking, and her work.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Susan Elizabeth Howe is assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University, a playwright and a poet. She is the former editor of *Exponent II* (1982-84), the poetry editor of *Dialogue*, and a member of the AML board. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shendean*, and other literary journals. This paper was delivered at the conjoint meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters and the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association 17 October 1992 at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

<sup>2</sup>She is known to readers as Virginia Sorensen, and this is how I will refer to her in this paper. In a departure from the strictures of academic discourse, I will also call her "Virginia" rather than "Sorensen," because I feel a deep bond of friendship and appreciation to her that suggests her first name to be a more appropriate way for me to speak of her.

<sup>3</sup>Actually, I have since learned that Mary Bradford has done considerable work with these little books.

<sup>4</sup>Quotations from the Little Books will be by year and the page number, not of the original, but of the typescript. The pagination is continuous through the typescript copy of sixteen Little Books.

# Virginia Sorensen: Literary Recollections from a Thirty-five Year Friendship

Mary Lythgoe Bradford<sup>1</sup>

ON THE WALL ABOVE my computer hangs a beautiful calligraphy framed in red and gold: "For her continuing and significant contribution to Mormon Literature, The Association of Mormon Letters is pleased to honor Virginia Sorensen Waugh as an honorary life member, January 1, 1992."

Though this honor was posthumous, Virginia would have cherished it. As one of the "lost generation" of Utah writers, in Ed Geary's term, she often felt that her intended audience had not appreciated her. I have myself been present in discussions about whether she was really a "Mormon" writer. I submit that she was Mormon in her deepest roots. A few years before her death she told me,

*I found my Mormonism was the thing that most interested people about me. And I have found it to be true through the years. It is what Alec [Waugh, her British second husband] called "A very great advantage!" To have a peculiar past.<sup>2</sup>*

I became one of the first to write about these contributions in 1956. My master's thesis, written under Dr. William Mulder at the University of Utah, was "Virginia Sorensen: An Introduction." He has generously shared his letters from her—from the fifties and part of the sixties. I have joined them to her letters to me that span my whole married life, ending just before her death just two weeks after my husband's death—both from cancer, in December 1991. When I spoke at her memorial service this year, two days before my husband's service in Salt Lake City, I said that I felt like a passenger on a ship that had run aground and left me clinging to a raft while my two closest companions were washed overboard.

I think now that a better metaphor would be that I was the one washed overboard while my two companions went on to greater glory. I am lonely without them, but I take comfort now in studying their influence on me. Virginia was a strong influence on my marriage, beginning with the letter she wrote two days before my wedding in the Salt Lake Temple, 12 September 1957:

*We will be thinking of you on The Day, wishing you every good thing. We will imagine you in room after room. We will see you in your gown with the flowers. The best wish is that the strong love I felt between you and Charles will strengthen even more. If there is that, everything else is right. Not things, of course, really, but what makes life good and steady, with a center from which everything moves in order.<sup>3</sup>*

Her gift was one of the illustrations from *The House Next Door*.

Shortly after my move to Washington, D.C., she wrote me a letter describing her anguish at the dissolution of her marriage to Fred Sorensen and congratulated me for marrying someone in a different field, since her marriage to an English teacher and a poet had caused a competition and a friction that finally parted them.

During her divorce proceedings, she rented a house in Washington to be near her brother Paul, her cousin Esther Peterson, and the Library of Congress where she hoped to finish research for a study of Hans Christian Anderson. After her marriage to Alec Waugh in 1968, she maintained a house for part of the year in Alexandria, twenty minutes away from my home in Arlington, Virginia. She had met Alec during one of her visits to MacDowell Colony in the fifties. "Alec and I were very hesitant after our

experiences to make a marriage out of our good friendship. But we needed at our time of life something in one place." The wedding announcement from the Rock of Gibraltar said simply that they planned to make Tangier their base but that they also planned to "keep on the move."

Later she wrote that Alec was worrying that he had "redomesticated" her because she was not working on her long-delayed sequel to *Kingdom Come*. "If I take even three years, by that time Alec will be over 80," she wrote.

*One thinks of all the time wasted when there seems so little of it ahead. What a paradox, the lessons the young need—especially creative women who pour themselves down endless drains and into endless laundry baskets—can't possibly be learned until they are beginning to get old. Now I wonder how my Plain Girl, having taken the First Step Away and having been frightened back again, managed to contain herself when she grew up. But of course, I did not necessarily make her a poet—perhaps pies will suffice if they will remain only images.*

In 1977, she wrote that, during a fever brought on by food poisoning, Alec had wished that she might become a "proper Anglican." So,

*as a good wife I am studying the catechism with a bishop in Tangier and will soon be confirmed. I wondered whether to tell you this but decided you were the very one I must tell. In a way, you now represent the entire LDS Church. Now I will be relieved of many sins that plagued me and can take communion with a quiet and contrite heart, resolving to live the Godly life. . . . So I feel at home, especially, kneeling with Alec.*

The rector of Christ church in Alexandria, congratulated her. "You bring something very special to the Anglican Church—the serious dedication and loyalty of the Mormons. We have much to learn from you."

She was also feeling fragile. An aneurism had been diagnosed between her eye and her brain, the ailment that killed her father. Her sister was dying of cancer. She managed to write a novel based on her life in Alexandria and a stint as a visiting profes-

sor at Oklahoma, *The Man with the Key*, and a children's book set in Morocco, *Friends of the Road*. After it became clear that the British were no longer welcome in Morocco, she and Alec moved to Tampa, Florida, near her children.

In 1980, she wrote that she and Alec celebrated their anniversary at The Rock. "We had the wedding day lunch and held hands coming back on the ferry. Two old Romantics mislaying our canes all over the boat." Although Virginia was never comfortable in Florida, she wrote, just before Alec's death in 1981, "We do well, Alec and I, a dear old couple rocking in our chairs on our dear old porch."

Always she punctuated my life with encouraging words, stories of her own life, books dedicated to my children. Since her life took her to more exotic ports, it took me a long while to realize how deeply we shared certain traits of the Mormon woman: domestic traits, a willingness to accompany and support our men, a love of children and family life. She sent encouraging letters and gifts to mark the stations of my family life. She kept track of my children, their birthdays, their weddings, their own children, my life in the Mormon Church. When Chick was called as a bishop, she wrote:

*I remember when I had Mumps in Alexandria, and my relations were not immune, Paul's wife [her sister-in-law] said, "What I'd do is call the bishop's wife." So I did. Dixie Reid Christensen, and she came and made all the difference. To be an improper bishop's wife must be comparable to being a Catholic without confession. You will be a most proper one. Give Bishop B. my congratulations.*

But our shared domesticities and family life were not the only bond. She always reminded me, too, of the importance of *The Work*. She would often sign her letters, "Go on with the good work, Dear Mary. I am proud of you." She meant my work as a writer—work that had always been sporadic with me but was part of the air she breathed.

She was very solicitous about my work as a writer and editor. She cooperated with my desire to publish a special section in *Dialogue* honoring her work. "Dear Mary, dear friend, your splendid intro-

duction is, like marriage, a public oath of devotion—or I value it as that. It has wrung from me a truly pleasurable tear.” This was in 1980.

In 1987, after the publication of my personal essay collection, she sent a white feather from Alec’s desk as a symbol and reminder of “WORK being done and being finished and being marvelous.” During my six-year labor on the life of Lowell Bennion, she urged me on. We had both hoped I could finish in time to help her with her autobiography. She offered to set me up in her little house while I perused her papers. The last time I saw her, a year ago last April on a visit to Washington, I felt the truth of her statement at the paradox of time running out for us.

I think that her letters to Bill and to me illustrate the main themes that were all of a piece—devotion to relationships and to her work. “How full of life and love she was, the insatiable Virginia!” These are the words of Bill Mulder in a letter accompanying his collection of her letters. A perfect description of Virginia as a person, a wife, mother, friend, lover, writer. Her letters to me and to Bill Mulder over a thirty-five-year period attest to that apt description and stand as a fitting tribute to her life and her work. And as Bill put it, “The postmarks on her letters are a roll call of travel and adventure.”

Her letters are glosses on her writing and, important for this group, on her creative process. Bill’s collection, from 1953 to 1991—last year—chronicle an especially productive era in her life. Not only was she writing *Kingdom Come*, including letters from Denmark during the year she spent there, courtesy of the Guggenheim Foundation, and the publication of *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, they are filled with interesting remarks about her other works. During this period, she also divorced Fred and married Alec.

The process of writing *Kingdom Come* comes alive, particularly the anguish and delight she felt in using materials from Bill’s dissertation on the history of the Scandinavian migration to Utah; it became an important book, *Homeward to Zion*.

She read one of his articles in 1954 in *Utah Historical Quarterly* that was, she wrote him,

*so exciting that I immediately began reading it to everybody . . . and getting ideas of how I might do better. For years and years I have believed—for what reason, I wonder, since I never really lived in the houses where the true tradition was but could only visit a while, and listen, and pause always by the gate where I could hear and see it?—that I was the one to tell this story you speak of. Almost I have heard the call!*

Her mother had been a Christian Scientist and her father an inactive or “jack” Mormon, but she attended the Mormon Church in Manti where she grew up and later came to know of the Mormon pioneer heritage of her own family and that of her first husband, Frederick Sorensen, whom she married in the Salt Lake Temple. When I met her she had just finished *Many Heavens*, the sixth of her adult novels, the third that grew partly from historical research. She was always uneasy with research, knowing that the novelist’s mind would transform facts and factual characters into something new. Members of her family and other readers who recognized events in her novels continually reminded her that “it wasn’t like that” and she had somehow mixed up the facts. Her sister Helen scolded her for not finding new subjects but never read *The Evening and the Morning* or *Many Heavens*, even though *Many Heavens* was dedicated to her.

Virginia had identified with Wallace Stegner’s *Conversations*, in which he defends mixtures of history, personal experience, and fact and then declares,

*It takes a pedestrian and literal mind to be worried about which is true [and] which is not true. It’s all of it true and all of it not true. . . . Any material that comes under my eye is legitimate for use as an imaginative re-creation.*

This was true of Virginia. Like all good writers, she was one “on whom nothing is lost” and therefore was taken with the wonder of life in all its manifestations. And she never lost the child within, retaining the gifts of wonder and love that inform her juvenile titles and her adult novels. She enjoyed



speaking at writers' conferences and talking to children's groups. In her later years, she began telling the stories of Hans Christian Anderson. She ruefully remarked that the size of her own brood—two children, three grandchildren—was extremely un-Mormon, but she was glad that her books were reaching children in many countries. The book that most delightfully illustrates her ability to imaginatively recreate the past out of "facts," memory, and her own artistry is *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*. She wrote in the foreword: "I remembered so many things I didn't know I knew . . .—so much is made up it is scarcely memory at all, but a dream dreamed out of memory."

She combined the three places of her childhood—Provo, Manti, American Fork.

*Things can be 20 years apart when I was a child. This makes me realize that I am always busy with fiction and no good at history. When I gather masses of material, as I did when I was writing Kingdom Come, I was using church history straight—much of it from Millennial Star and Bill Mulder. I felt a great obligation to Bill that my book should be accurate.*

Bill sent her chapters from his dissertation and useful primary sources from Denmark. She wrote him that his materials had given her the courage to begin to apply for a Guggenheim in Denmark, the land of her forebears. "Is there anything so marvelous as beginning to feel the shaping of a tale, a scene, to begin to see the people walking! It is a deep disturbance, but what else is living?" She looked ahead to a stay at the MacDowell Colony for writers in Peterborough, Vermont, in July and August of 1954. "Imagine, not having to stop to make breakfast, lunch, dinner, and ten thousand things between!"

In August she wrote from MacDowell:

*It is wonderful to work again, hours and hours each day, and that I brought so much of your work along and have had time to read and plan and think. I am completely sure, now, that it will be a saga, a true saga.*

She was creating,

*whole scenes for the novel, scenes that will never be in it as they are but will come to me again to be reshaped into the places they belong. I know the people now—they will be ready to slip into the setting when I find it. . . . Bill, I do say pray for me, I am so deeply and terribly serious about this. It is so old a dream, that particular story. I thought of it first when I first knew there were books and that a woman might write one.*

She had also met Hollis Alpert of the *New Yorker* who had invited her to do a reminiscence story that would become *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*.

She returned to her home in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, in time to get ready for Denmark and to lament that she was too busy.

*MacDowell was such peace—and since I came home it is hard to learn how to write with one hand and keep house with the other. . . . Say once in a while that this saga of mine is a good idea—I am having a terrific fight to get away; it is as if I must drag myself out by the roots.*

How familiar that lament to many of us here today!

In her next letter, she was off to Denmark:

*Mother wrote a lovely thing the other day—"Virginia, when you went alone to Mexico I had butterflies; now you're going alone to Denmark I am having buffalos." Nice and Western—and motherish. I'm having some buffalos myself.*

At Christmas 1954 Bill wrote that "I shall feed you the little things that come my way which, read on Danish soil, may mean so much more to you." He fed her more than "little things." The Danish immigrant diaries he shared with her described the missionary experience in Denmark and detailed accounts of conversions, then emigration and settlement in Ephraim and Manti. He pointed out to her that Utah archives were richer than the ones in Denmark. But "Denmark itself is your treasurehouse, its people, its countryside, its towns and villages, its history." He apologizes for sending his dissertation chapters: "Please accept them as long letters from me, a letter of the past you will recreate."

When her story came out in the *New Yorker*, Bill wrote that it "seems such an unlikely place to come upon a Sanpete farmer. Perhaps your life will jar it out of its sophisticated clichés and return it to life. Baptism by irrigation water."

In January 1956 he announced to Virginia that one of his graduate students "had a seizure" and had chosen her as a subject for her thesis subject. She was generous in her response:

*That was a seizure! It does seem to me that this poor girl's committee might have given her better advice. . . . Yet I won't pretend I'm not pleased in a queer sort of way, mostly because it will be so pleasant for my mother to talk about. . . . You might tell Miss Mary Lythgoe (what a nice name, one pictures her lithely going in and out of the library) that my character won't bear analysis, esp. the part that ought to dig out, wrap up, and mail things.*

Then she announced that she has finished part I, Vol. L. of *Kingdom Come*.

She allows as how it,

*rather horrifies me to think of anybody reading any of my old stuff; so much of it I don't remember at all. Since I never keep anything and have never felt egotistical enough to have a clipping bureau, I have almost none of this on hand. Thank goodness! It seems to me a great part of doing new work is getting completely rid of the old.*

By 19 March 1956 she was able to write:

*There is always a time when things begin to go well on a novel (when the back finally seems broken and one runs up and down stairs to catch the notions and cook the dinner) and the other writing seems impossible. . . . This is good though often as not I toss out three-quarters of what I have done on one those of those rushing days.*

I had chosen a thesis subject who was in the white hot fire of creativity. She was concerned about her husband who wished to change jobs, her son who was trying to find his calling in life, her daughter who was choosing to marry.

*A woman is so split apart, so one place or another, so in the work and out of it. Perhaps this is the real reason why we have so few women who composed, wrote, painted really well? Of course a very old explanation, but new when one finds it in operation [in one's own life].*

I don't know where this dilemma is better expressed than in Virginia's letters.

She returned to MacDowell throughout the late 1950s. In one letter, she is simply waiting. "It is the same with creation as with love, I think, nothing can be forced that is worth having."

*Then she became, rather frightened, I think because [Kingdom Come] was persisting in spinning itself out too much, too thinly, and there was so much I found it impossible to reach around it. I would tell myself, 'But there is a simple way to do it if only I can find it.' A way that will say very little and yet manage to say it all, like My Antonia.*

She was thoughtful enough to send me a telegram on my successful M.A. orals exam. In September, she needed more info about Erastus Snow. In December, "I think the Devil decided this book should get finished and so tapped me on the shoulder—bursitis."

*There is still so much to do. . . . I cannot say it is finished until I have found what I am after. Sometimes I'm not sure what that is, only when I get it, so rarely, I recognize [it]. It's inconstant on the pages even though so very constant in me. Rather like love, perhaps.*

*I have been in such despair about ever finishing this work at all that it is a kind of sickness. I tell myself, it shouldn't matter so much. Yet it does, and day and night are like a devious twisting of story and people and paragraphs and landscapes. And I go right on working as if I believe it were all splendid instead of the miserable stuff it is! . . . Perhaps one can only work so hard so steadily for a shorter while. You'll find it incredible but I have thrown away almost everything I had written when I saw you! Nothing interferes with my work now except myself and this strange terror that nothing can be good enough.*

What writer hasn't felt that!

*Why pretend I'm any sort of scholar? I'm simply not. Or a critic either. It's enough to be what one is, even if it's rather smallish in its own way. . . . It seems that all you gave me must be taken away! Yet I know you'll understand. A curious thing, all this. I have never learned so much about writing as in this mighty struggle, in which I have committed every possible sin in the writing manual. Not that I ever saw one. . . . I sometimes feel like HCA [Hans Christian Anderson]. This may sound extravagant but I had long since read his amazed statements about the success of the little tales as compared with the difficult heartrending struggle of the novels. . . . The children's field is its own world with its own enthusiasms, its own kind of dignity. People are not afraid to shout out and say "We Love You." [She wrote this when she was in demand as a Newbery winner.]*

At the end of April, she wrote to Bill about the,

*business of taking out the absolutely necessary materials you gave me. One must take them out and yet leave them in which constitutes the difficulty. To have been without them entirely would have been to be without a book all. Do you understand what I mean?*

She noticed that she had copied so many words from the primary sources that the book was not sounding like the characters anymore but like a dissertation.

Bill is leaving for India on a Fulbright, so she advises him to,

*emulate the missionaries and write something on the spot every single day. One forgets precious details that emerge in full value much later at the time of writing. My ship logs are very useful to me now—even for the quality of the sea, even the feeling of swinging.*

She spoke at a writers' conference at the University of Utah in late spring, then received an invitation to my wedding during the summer of 1957. She wrote Bill:

*Today Mary's announcement came and I'm delighted for her. He is splendid. She brought him to lunch with me one day at the U. and I liked the feeling between them. She was very good for me at the work-shop, never failing to come and sit close, always saying something afterward that gave me a lift. She kept calling me "Lovely lady," bless her, perhaps knowing I needed to feel less weary.*

I am glad I was able to do that for her since that was her gift to me during the whole time of our friendship.

When it was obvious that her marriage was failing, she wrote wearily to Bill:

*I can only think of this struggle all the years I felt right to find my work here at home, to help out and make sort of a life of my own. When it finally led me away into places and studies I thought beautiful and good and of what it has all meant to him.*

They planned a trip to England and Denmark, saying, "There is hope for us." She begged him to "pray for me to get back to work once more because in that, certainly is salvation."

The trip, however, only made the depths of their incompatibility clearer. To Bill she admitted, "It's hopeless. I should have known. I was warned and told but had to learn and try. Now the future is for me to try to do something with, on my own." That was in the autumn. She went to MacDowell where she found herself salvaging much of earlier drafts of *Kingdom Come* that she had thrown away. By January 1959, she is thanking Bill for his help in recreating the character of Erastus Snow and is sorry that she can't include the death of his brother Willard because his seizure right in a meeting and death on shipboard attracts her "dramatic sense." A few days later she recounts a "study in human disintegration (mine) and I could hardly bear to face it each day. The characters died, the story failed, the meaning disappeared." She is now rewriting the whole thing from the end of Part II. Harcourt wants it by April, but she can't make it. The divorce proceedings are a strain, but she feels fit and "I am not afraid to walk a mile on a lonely road with a deep snow bank on either side."

On 18 February 1959, she thinks it will be finished in about sixty more pages. Speaking of her divorce and his, she says, "So much hurt is in expectancies. We are to such a great extent our memories and our hopes when the only reality is here and now" (March 17, 1959). On 29 March, she writes:

*I finished the last lines at 4:10 p.m. I simply sat still for a while; I couldn't move. . . . I'm not in the least sure of it, only glad it is in one piece at last and that I can work on it. It is 634 pages—isn't that ridiculous—and too tedious and preachy and repetitive and many other awful things. But it's in one piece and now I have four copies. . . . If only the book isn't too terrible!*

While others read, she takes a difficult trip to Utah where a sister accuses her of clinging to the past and not writing about her new life.

*Yet I feel I must be fastened to the good familiar earth somehow. . . . Bill, I was actually on the verge of abandoning Hanne's saga as if it were just another weakness. I will need your faith in this, Bill, if you truly love it.*

Next, she writes that the novel at last has a title.

*Interesting how it happened. We were having a late supper with Graham Green, an old friend of Alec's, and had been talking about his The Power and the Glory. And I thought how wonderful to find a title from a quotation so familiar one didn't even have to quote it—and suddenly the same prayer gave me mine. [Kingdom Come.]*

She then comments on her personal life.

*I now TRUST nothing but work. It is always waiting, there, when I need it. If I am too tired or unquiet, it waits for me. It gives exciting promise of earning my living and even permits me to travel. It is even a companion.*

Realistically, she admits, "There is much it is not."

And what it was not is soon filled by Alec Waugh. To Bill, she writes, "Here, thank God, is a good even a very great lover. What a relief to know people of another background, who are without those dreadfully-instilled voice-of-God guilts that

rob us so bitterly." At long last she looks forward to a mature love, feeling that "one has earned freedom in love, and how poor a stuff the perturbed, vaunted 'young love' is beside it" (Sept. 11, 1959). In November she is invited to speak to a Western History Club Meeting at Algie Ballif's house on the subject of the Mormon Scandinavians; she feels unsure because "I remember only very few facts when it comes right down to it. They have become so involved with the things of the imagination that I am not at all sure which is which."

Later she travels to Manti with her father. "It is terrible in a way, even though wonderful in other ways, that his whole life, except occasional journeys has happened in that little space, Provo to Manti." But later she concludes, "I get a feeling too that Sanpete is as big as the world if one can just get to the bottom of it."

On 3 January 1960, Bill receives the book and wires her: "Have hefted plates. *Kingdom Come* magnificent achievement. Feel great pride in you. Acknowledgment too overwhelming. On to the trilogy!" She celebrates by traveling with her son to Africa and Spain and plans a trip West to show Alec God's country. "How wonderful it is to be cherished by a good man."

On Palm Sunday 1962, she is trying to write again and has decided to,

*gather together my Mormon childhood stories, of which there are 6 or 8 around. Alec thinks this volume with some work added, chiefly a story of my first love, a kitten, will be my best work. I hope he's right.*

After a thirty-year gap, Virginia wrote Bill again in August 1991, happily reporting that reminiscences about Utah were coming in a flood.

*In my 80th year with its special problems, mostly failing eyesight, I find aging a big writing block. I cannot seem to finish that autobiography which was due two years ago. I have done nothing creative since Alec died, more shame to me because he was anxious to have me go on. Often I have lovely dreams and brainstorm, in rhyme and out, but cannot find the energy to catch them and they blow away. . . . I feel a great flood of remorse and sadness when I think of*

*my failures, especially that I abandoned the Kingdom Come trilogy. . . . I have been troubled that Kingdom Come was never translated and published in Denmark and felt that it was enough. . . . What difficult scholarly tasks I set myself! And I was never really a good scholar. When I became involved in the characters I was apt to forget the history behind them. . . . Most days I decide to forget all this and go on a picnic—like today! Beth and her husband, a splendid Englishman married at age 57 just as I married mine are fond of excursions in the Blue Ridges which he is seeing for the first time.*

In "amazed disbelief," she was planning another trip to Utah. "Esther Peterson, my ageless cousin, insists I go with her once more. I think I might enjoy China too when she goes once again." She did go to Utah in September 1991; when she returned home, she discovered that she was full of cancer. Companionably, she wrote me not long before her death:

*I woke this morning from a delicious dream of Alec and me staying in a chalet in the south of France. I wrote it down on the first page of my new clean book—Perhaps this one will be a book of dreams? I wonder.*

She was constantly wondering.

So she left us, her wits about her till the end. I talked to her a week before her death. She called me her "sweet Boz" and sounded serene. Then she died, still my mentor, leaving me this example: She met each stage of life graciously. As certain powers diminished with age, she found ways to keep wondering and looking. As the power to travel diminished, she wrote letters like this:

*I'm not writing because I am cooking, but something cooks constantly in the place where memories sleep, or fester. . . . I stir in a sentence now and then and when I get to the notebook I have forgotten how it goes.*

She is "quite contented in my rocker by the window and my excursions into this amazingly various and changing world."

After two services, one in Hendersonville and one in Provo, Virginia's ashes were buried near her parents in the Provo Cemetery in that good, famil-

iar earth. Once she told me: "I decided that what happened to me wasn't as important as what I thought about it." We don't know what she thought about her last journey, but we do know she embarked in the same blessed spirit of peace and courage that she showed on every other journey of her life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Mary Lythgoe Bradford, a personal friend of Virginia Sorensen's, former editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, is the author of *Leaving Home: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987) and a forthcoming biography of Lowell L. Bennion. This paper was presented at the Association for Mormon Letters session of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association annual meeting, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah, 17 October 1992.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Bradford, "If You are a Writer, You Write: An Interview with Virginia Sorensen," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13 (Autumn 1980): 17-36.

<sup>3</sup>All quotations are from letters to me or to William Mulder, currently in my possession.

# Overworked Stereotypes or Accurate History? Images of Polygamy in *The Giant Joshua*

Jessie L. Embry<sup>1</sup>

**W**HAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP between history and literature, especially where they seem to overlap in historical novels? David Cowart in his study, *History and the Contemporary Novel* argues,

*Every culture expresses itself more definitively through its artists than through its historians. . . . Mark Twain and Walt Whitman capture the American spirit better than does Francis Parkman. . . . Artists provide the myths by which any cultural body defines itself; the myths that historians mistakenly seek to unravel. Thus history makes its greatest contribution when it supplies the creative artist with raw material.*

He cautioned novelists, however, to avoid producing "a distant mirror of their own fantasy lives" and thus "achieve historical actuality less often than they think."<sup>2</sup> Morroe Berger, in *Real and Imagined Worlds*, pointed out that historical fiction lies on the margin between fact and fiction in most readers' minds. Since novels frequently follow the events of the past, "readers . . . accept the novelist's conclusion . . . as applying to social life outside as well as inside the story." He added, however, that "there do exist historical and social science studies . . . with which to test the insights found in novels."<sup>3</sup>

One way to analyze historical novels is to see how closely the characters match the popular images or stereotypes of the historical time period in the novel. According to Walter Lippman's classic 1922 study,

*The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see*

*it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.*

This type of education requires a careful study of "when our ideas started, where they started, how they came to us, why we accept them." That information "enables us to know what novel, play, picture, phrase, planted one conception in this mind, another in this mind."<sup>4</sup>

Some Mormon fiction has been especially full of stereotypes. As Neal Lambert explains,

*The popular notion about what a Mormon is has not lent itself to great literature. Polygamy, secret rites, blood atonement, priestly orders—all such have made the Mormon slip easily into a stereotype for slick fiction and gross comedy.<sup>5</sup>*

This paper will examine the images of polygamy in one Mormon novel, Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*,<sup>6</sup> attempting to determine whether they are overworked stereotypes or accurate history.

First, it will discuss Whipple's view of history and then look at how various reviewers have reacted to her historical information. After a brief description of the characters, it will point out some of the popular stereotypes of polygamy which Whipple reinforced in her book. Hopefully this exercise will provide the education Lippman talked about and avoid the temptations "of the casual mind . . . to pick out or stumble upon a sample which supports or defies its prejudice, and then to make it the representative of a whole class."<sup>7</sup> For as Gordon W. Allport explained in his study of prejudice, "We can

distinguish between a valid generalization and a stereotype only if we have solid data concerning the existence of . . . true group differences."<sup>8</sup>

In a review of Amelia Bean's *The Fancher Train* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), Maurine Whipple conceded that Bean had "unusual" narrative skills but added, "I do hope her next book is all fiction. For while as a story . . . is entertaining, as history it comes near to being cause for libel."<sup>9</sup> Historical information was very important to Whipple. In a letter to director John Ford she explained, "I thank the gods daily for a man who refuses to bow to the stereotypes but has the courage and genius to suck the real right juice out of this West I love."<sup>10</sup>

Avoiding stereotypes and giving what she felt was accurate history was especially essential to her in writing *Giant Joshua*. As she explained in an interview published in *Dialogue*, "I looked up every word, every historical reference. . . . It seemed to me that if I created an era, I had to be true to it. So I had to look up costumes and clothes, even the dialect they used."<sup>11</sup> Within this historical framework, she wanted to tell the story as accurately as possible, but she wanted to avoid "paint[ing her ancestors] with too white a brush" (*Joshua*, preface). Ferris Greenslet, Whipple's editor at Houghton Mifflin, also recognized the importance of accurate historical information:

*It is going to be important to get the chronological historical background of the story copper-fastened, both because . . . the hen-minded readers would object if it isn't and because solid foundation of the sort makes for better architecture in the super structure.*<sup>12</sup>

Despite Whipple's and her publisher's attempts to avoid historical error, Nels Anderson, a sociologist and historian who had lived in St. George, identified some errors that might offend Church leaders, "brethren who have the facts." In a letter to Juanita Brooks, he pointed out that Patrick E. Connor, a U.S. army officer who came to Utah during the Civil War, was referred to as O'Connor or Conner throughout the book, that St. George was referred to by the name too early, that school children recit-

ing state capitals gave Washington state the capital of Olympia in 1862, long before Washington became a state, and that "stew bum" and "chewing the fat" were modern terms that would have not been used at the time.<sup>13</sup>

These minor errors escaped most readers, including the "brethren." Most of the contemporary and more recent reviews applauded Whipple's novel for its use of history; only Apostle John A. Widstoe was not pleased with her portrayal of polygamy.<sup>14</sup> While he felt that the novel described the "high spiritual motives" for polygamy "with some degree of fairness," he charged that "the example selected, a life defeated because of polygamy, leaves a bitter, angry distaste for the system" which was "unfair" since "there were fewer unhappy marriages under 'Mormon' polygamy than under monogamy."<sup>15</sup> Edward Geary questioned whether Widstoe could give accurate information on the success of polygamy, but then dismissed the question as decisive on quality: "The validity of a work of fiction does not depend on its adherence to a statistically accurate representation of reality but on its conveying a genuine sense of human possibilities."<sup>16</sup>

While Geary is right in pointing out that fiction bears no obligation to be "statistically accurate," some readers have accepted *The Giant Joshua* as an example of the "typical" Mormon polygamous family. These readers would agree with reviewers Bruce Jorgensen and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who feel that "few other Mormon novels match its historical scope and solidity" and have called it "an excellent place to begin in developing an understanding of pioneer life."<sup>17</sup> While the MacIntyre family are "complicated people" who "live in their own element,"<sup>18</sup> they also embody many of the stereotypes about Mormon polygamy that both Mormons and non-Mormons have accepted as typical.

A brief summary of the MacIntyre family reveals some of these stereotypes. The MacIntyres raised Clorinda, the protagonist of the novel from childhood after her father's death. She affectionately referred to them as Uncle Abijah and Aunt 'Sheba. When Clory developed a relationship with a gentile from Johnston's army and when the MacIntyres were

asked to move to St. George, Brigham Young suggested that Abijah marry his seventeen-year-old foster daughter. Youthful and full of excitement, Clory brought life to everyone including the first wife 'Sheba who hated to admit "there was something like bells in Clory's voice, a lovely warmth and roundness, a smoothness—like fresh-churned butter after you've worked it awhile with your hands" (4). 'Sheba was a domineering first wife who occasionally showed compassion for the other wives but who, as Willie explained to Clory, "wore the pants in the family" (27). Willie, the second wife, was a "duty" wife, a familyless immigrant that the MacIntyres had taken in as part-convalescent, part-servant. Thus, she was conveniently present when Brigham Young asked Abijah to marry a plural wife. Homely and without much personality, her virtues were hidden far beneath the surface; but "when pity or love kindled the hidden depths in her eyes, her face was gently beautiful" (6).

Abijah was a stern and dutiful Mormon patriarch, obediently trying to follow the prophet, advance in the Church, and keep his families in order. But that was only a hard public shell.

*Clory had come to believe he really was the most tender-hearted of men underneath—like a coconut a missionary had brought back once from the Sandwich Islands, tough and hairy outside and needing a lot of opening up before one could get at the sweet good core. (121-22)*

Yet she also felt that "bullied by his first wife, Abijah in turn bullied his younger wives and found in that his greatest reward for polygamy" (295).

An obvious question, based on Widstoe's review and Whipple's novel is the success of polygamy as a marital system. Kimball Young, a sociologist who wrote *Isn't One Wife Enough?* attempted a statistical measure. Based on his study of 175 families, representing plural marriages performed during the Utah settlement period, he identified nearly 53 percent as "highly successful" or "reasonably successful," one-fourth as "moderately successful with some conflict but on the whole fair adjustment," and 23 percent had "considerable" or "severe conflict."<sup>19</sup>

While all of the problems Whipple presents in her book certainly occurred in some polygamous families, few families were plagued with all of them at once; and another study shows that polygamy was "surprisingly successful."<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly enough, despite her fictional portrayal of polygamy in *The Giant Joshua*, Whipple gives a more moderate view in a nonfiction book of travel and description. Based on her study of her own polygamous grandparents and other St. George residents, she concluded: "In spite of gentile opinion, plural marriages were often happy." With a "patriarch" father, plural families had "achieved such dignity and contentment, such a sense of family solidarity" that the children considered themselves all part of one family.<sup>21</sup>

The reasons for the discrepancy between Whipple's fictional and nonfictional portrayal of polygamy lie outside this study; but certainly polygamy in *The Giant Joshua* was much less benignly portrayed. From Brigham Young and Erastus Snow to Abijah, men had favorite wives, who suffered intense jealousy as a result. Only Clory's childhood friend Palmyra Wright, a first wife, even approached a "happy" experience. And Pal conceded to Clory polygamy "was hard. There's no denying that" (550).

From a sociological perspective, it is possible that friction in polygamy developed because a shared husband exacerbated existing problems, rather than creating them. Kimball Young found, and my research reinforces, the view that "personality divergence, economic problems and sense of differential treatment by the husband"<sup>22</sup> were more important than simply being married to the same man. Some polygamous families reported cases where one wife dominated and another wife was very submissive (similar to the relationship between Bathsheba and Willie). There were cases, of course, where one wife (sometimes the first wife, like Bathsheba) was very jealous of a younger, more attractive wife (like Clory). However, there were fewer cases of jealousy than one might expect; and because of their religious motivation and desire to make the marriages work, the sister wives overlooked or suppressed many troubling experiences.<sup>23</sup>



How typical (or stereotypical) were Abijah's three wives? (He marries a fourth at the end of the book, but she has almost no role in the action). One 1983 character in a novel stated, "Three was the number most Mormon men had if they were polygamists."<sup>24</sup> But my study, covering marriages performed between 1880 and 1904, shows that three, or even more, was not the typical number of wives. About 60 percent of the men married only one plural wife. Approximately 20 percent had three. Only 20 percent had more than three.<sup>25</sup>

Willie fits a stereotype that Mormon plural wives were older women who were very homely and polygamy might have been their only chance to marry. Anderson contributed to this stereotype by characterizing the immigrants as "older women, many of them ranging between 25 and 35 years of age. . . . Polygamy was a boon for them."<sup>26</sup> Mark Twain played off the same stereotype when he wrote that he was ready to "achieve a great reform" against polygamy, "until I saw the Mormon women. Then I was touched. My heart was wiser than my head. It warmed toward these poor, ungainly, and pathetically 'homely' creatures." He believed, "The man that marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity . . . and the man who marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity."<sup>27</sup>

Determining the personal appearance of plural wives is too subjective a question, but it is possible to determine if plural wives were "older women." According to my study, men chose plural wives who were approximately the age of his first wife at the time of their marriage even though he was ten to thirty years older. For example, a husband was usually between twenty-one and twenty-five when he married his first wife, and she was between fifteen and twenty. The man was between twenty-six and thirty-five when he married a second wife, and she was between fifteen and twenty-five years old, usually closer to nineteen.<sup>28</sup> Plural wives were, thus, usually about the age of the first wife at the time of first marriage, not older like Willie or younger like Clory.

The popular contemporary view and sometimes reported historical understanding has been that no man would be interested in marrying more than one wife except to increase his sexual opportunities. Therefore, nearly all novels about polygamy have as their heroine a young woman who is the object of polygamous courtship or a newly married plural wife for an older husband. Because of Victorian America's reticence on sexual relationships, I know of no reactions to polygamy's sexual component recorded by its participants. While the descriptions of a plural husband's lustful desires for his new young wife probably led to an increased readership of a novel, there are no historical records to justify them. James Hulett, Kimball Young's research assistant, found plural husbands, wives, and children uniformly were unwilling to discuss sex. The standard reply he received about intimate relationships was that their function was strictly for procreation.<sup>29</sup>

Whipple describes fairly accurately the living arrangements in Mormon polygamous families. Except just after a plural marriage or in times of economic stress, wives lived in separate homes usually in the same community. Frequently the houses were on adjoining lots, joined by a well-beaten path. The husband alternated nights or weeks with his wives. Abijah caused gossip by spending nearly all of his nights with Clory just after he consummated their marriage; but except for that brief period, he alternated among the three in strict order, first nightly, then weekly. Whipple implies that the only reason Clory had her own home was because she insisted on it; Abijah would have rather had all the wives living in the same home.<sup>30</sup>

With separate homes and a regular visiting schedule, plural wives usually were "queens" of their own castles. Economic resources as well as affections were divided, usually with considerable effort at making them equal. There were times of loneliness for each wife when the husband was gone to another home; wives were especially lonely when husbands were on missions. A study of monogamous families during the same time period shows that those wives had many of the same concerns. Monogamous husbands were often off on their jobs; they were also called to

serve missions where they were separated from their wives and children.<sup>31</sup> Whipple seemed to blame all of these feelings of loneliness on polygamy rather than recognizing them as part of the social and cultural life-style.

Some historians have argued that Victorian ideals actually discouraged close relationships between husbands and wives. According to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, a feminist historian, during the nineteenth century "rigid gender-role[s] . . . within the family and within society as a whole" led "to the emotional segregation of women and men."<sup>32</sup> Whipple recognized some of the closeness shared by nineteenth-century women. Clory, for instance, frequently confided her feelings to Pal Wright (e.g., 71-73, 548-50, 612-13). Women also met together to quilt, gossip, and celebrate (360, 420, 424). Yet Whipple's women seem to deviate from the nineteenth-century model in demanding close relationships with their husbands. Pal and David Wright had such an emotionally intimate relationship that Clory could complain, "David Wright's a different kind of man than Abijah MacIntyre" (550). After Abijah returned from his mission, Clory felt,

*a great delight at having him home. One got tired of the constant society of women. Female society grew to be insipid, like sleazy silk, only man-goods had 'body' and pith when you whanged it. Three years was a long time to be separated from one's man. . . . She could even understand how a polygamist wife with an absent husband might be tempted to run off with a too-persuasive gentile. (463-64)*

What do these and other stereotypes add to *The Giant Joshua*? Are they useful or do they dominate the story? Since Whipple was a descendant of polygamous families, it is possible that Whipple was simply telling a family story which included a kernel of truth, the one example where the stereotypes fits. Whipple's grandmother, Cornelia Agatha Lenzi, was the third wife of John Daniel Thompson McAllister. However, Cornelia was twenty-three rather than a teenager when she married; John was forty. She was born in Philadelphia and her mother stayed there. Unlike Clory, her father did not die

crossing the plains; he came to Utah and married four more wives. John's second wife, Angeline Sophronia Goforth, was not an immigrant; she was born in Illinois and was seventeen when she married thirty-year-old John. McAllister, who served as president of the St. George and the Manti temples, had a total of nine wives, seven by 1880, thirteen years before he moved to Manti. Therefore, while Whipple used elements of her grandparents' stories in *The Giant Joshua*, it is not completely their history.<sup>33</sup>

Another possibility is that the stereotypes say more about Whipple and her time period than they do about nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy. Maurine Whipple was part of what Edward Geary calls the "lost generation" of Mormon novelists "of the 1940s" whose writings "have their roots in the author's effort to come to terms with his or her Mormon heritage."<sup>34</sup> *The Giant Joshua* might be Whipple's attempts to understand polygamy. According to Eugene England, "The novel declines when the author's resentment takes over and she focuses self-indulgently on the horrors of polygamy."<sup>35</sup> Whipple's own comments reflect this uneasiness with polygamy. In *This is the Place*, Whipple called polygamy "a stern doctrine, never an easy flowering sensuality."<sup>36</sup> In an interview, she talked about the "resentment" of "my father's generation," "the sons and daughters of polygamy."<sup>37</sup> I interviewed the children of Mormon polygamists and did not find this same resentment. Whipple's "resentment" may stem partially from a generation of polygamous grandchildren struggling not only to understand the principle of plural marriage but also to determine the role of Mormonism in their lives or they might simply be her personal struggle with polygamy and Mormonism.

Whipple's stereotypes of polygamy are common in other Mormon literature of the 1940s. Virginia Sorensen's first novel, *A Little Lower than the Angels*, published one year after Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*, included a number of stereotypes.<sup>38</sup> Mercy Baker, the first wife of Simon Baker, was not totally converted to Mormonism but stayed with the other Saints because her husband believed. A very strong woman at first, she was weakened by childbirth un-

til she could not care for her children and home. Acting on Joseph Smith advice, Simon brought in an older English immigrant, Charlot Leavitt, as a housekeeper. Joseph suggested that in time Simon might want to marry her as plural wife. However, as Simon and Charlot were crossing the Mississippi from Nauvoo back to Simon's home in Iowa, Charlot convinced him that they should be married immediately since it would not be "proper" for her to live in the house with Simon without being married to him. Simon and Mercy's son, Jarvie, did not approve of the second marriage; he could not understand why it was all right for his father to have sexual relationships with a woman other than his mother when the previous housekeeper had been dismissed because of advances she made to Jarvis. Mercy, who knew about plural marriage from her friendship with Eliza R. Snow, deduced that Simon had married Charlot; and while she could not do without Charlot's help, she resented the situation.

These stereotypes have appeared in Mormon fiction since the first anti-polygamous novels. Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt identify four novels written between 1855 and 1856 as "particularly important because they set the pattern, so far as theme and characteristics are concerned for most of the anti-Mormon novels and stories that followed." Arrington and Haupt point out, however, that the novelists relied on "contemporary images or stereotypes in describing Mormons."<sup>39</sup> These stereotypes include strong women who accept Mormonism because their husbands do, weak men who fall under the authority of Church leaders, and Mormon households as jealousy-ridden Turkish harems, to name a few. It seems likely that Whipple and Sorensen were among the novelists who were still using the stereotypes in the twentieth century.

However, as Edward Geary explained, authors of the "lost generation" are dealing with issues of identity more than simply recycling old stereotypes. According to Geary, "The protagonist [in the novels] is nearly always a character 'in the middle': something of an individual caught between his or her instinct for freedom and the demands of loyalty and obedience." Just as Mercy and Clory died with the tension unre-

solved, Whipple "want[ed] in a way to become a wholehearted member of the community yet long[ed] to escape to find some mode of life less filled with hardships, more rewarding culturally and aesthetically."<sup>40</sup>

Some of these novelists and their characters leave the community "for a life both creative and individualistic."<sup>41</sup> Whipple never really left St. George and continued to be "caught" between her desire for freedom and love of her culture. Sorensen, on the other hand, never lived in Utah after her youth and once commented,

*As a writer and as a person, I can honestly say that I am not particularly interested in Mormons. It is by a series of accidents of birth that I must fill out the blank of myself with such words as 'white' and 'female' and 'American' and 'Mormon.' Each of these has its own complex of meanings by now, and its own perpetuity, no matter how much I might choose to alter my climate and my clothes and my beliefs and my loyalties. The more passionately I might rebel against any one of them, the more deeply it would, in actuality, be affecting me. It seems to me that most mere rebellion is a young thing, apt to be exhausting and unproductive. When it can at last be calmed down into analysis and understanding art becomes possible.<sup>42</sup>*

It is possible to hypothesize that, because of that attitude, Sorensen's later novels which also deal with polygamy in Utah, avoid stereotyped characters and situations, depicting Mormons as unique individuals with common concerns in dealing with polygamy but varying reactions. Whipple, however, continued to rebel against the Mormon society and was never really able to "calm down." That might partially explain her inability to complete another novel.

But not only novelists reported the stereotypes. As I have already mentioned, Nels Anderson's *Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah*, also published in 1942, contains many of the same stereotypes about polygamy as the fiction. Anderson first came to St. George in 1908 when he was on his way to work on the Panama Canal but "a freight train crew stranded me in the most uninviting of places, and after one thing and another, I came to a ranch among the Mormons, was made genuinely welcome, and

felt at home." As a result of his stay, he joined the Mormon Church in 1909, attended Dixie Academy and Brigham Young University, and eventually studied sociology at the University of Chicago. In 1934 he returned to southern Utah with a grant from Columbia University to study the Mormons, and *Deseret Saints* was the result of that study.<sup>43</sup> While some of his study (statistics about the number of immigrants) seem to reflect population sampling methods, other views (the age and homeliness of plural wives) were probably based more on impressions.

Another possible reason for Whipple's stereotypes is that she wanted to deal with the emotionalism which had haunted her about life in polygamous families. While the traditional and official story has been Widstoe's "polygamous families were as successful as monogamous families," Whipple, being a descendant of "the principle," felt scarred by polygamy. She explained in an interview,

*You see, the thing about polygamy is that the spirit that prompted it didn't die out. Men went on thinking that they should do this. It sort of bred a feeling that they—at least among the Mormons in Utah—that women were lower than men; they were chattel. Well, I had been brought up on these early stories, and especially from talking to the old people, I knew that their dreams, their realities, their goals, were a lot different than the things that had come about.*

She felt that the Church needed to,

*get rid of its authoritarian attitude. It had its place in the early days, but it doesn't now. You can't say to people, "Do this because I tell you to do it." You can't do that anymore. This generation just isn't going to accept it.<sup>44</sup>*

Her novel was one of the first attempts to deal with what might be called the darker side of plural marriage and some of the unspoken negative emotions of women.

Whipple also strongly believed that the Church had departed its original goals. Rather than striving for brotherhood, the leaders were only interested in materialistic concerns. She believed that *The Giant Joshua* and the two books of the trilogy which were to follow would trace the "Grand Idea" which had

sustained the Mormon pioneers. In correspondence with everyone from fans to editors, she explained her concerns about the direction the Mormon Church was going.

*The question seems to be: Is the idea of brotherly love so naive and impractical that it must be sacrificed if Success is to be achieved? I do not believe that such a postulation is inevitable despite events, despite Church snobbishness.<sup>45</sup>*

She felt that many Latter-day Saints opposed the materialism of the Church leaders and saw "a gulf between the Mormon people and their leaders,"<sup>46</sup> But just as a "pendulum" had swung towards "success," she felt that it would swing back to the Mormon "Idea" of brotherhood.

*I also believe (in fact, I know—as many humble people have insisted so long) that my books will help bring about their consummation; will help readjust and clarify Mormon thinking, will help reestablish this Idea.<sup>47</sup>*

Finally, although the stereotypes have probably been around for years, it is possible that Whipple's characters who were very much her own, have become the images of polygamy because the novel has been read so widely. It becomes the age-old question of which came first—the chicken or the egg. As I have lectured on polygamy throughout Utah, people have frequently asked me if I have read *The Giant Joshua* and then have told me how accurately they felt it portrayed polygamy. Many of the views that we have of polygamy might come from readers searching for images and then translating them into historical fact. As one reader wrote to Whipple,

*Like most grandchildren of the Pioneers, I've been raised on tales of . . . the early days in St. George, but it wasn't until I read your book that I fully appreciated the hardships those good people faced and the faith that must have been theirs.<sup>48</sup>*

A special temptation for some descendants of polygamous families has been to assume that their family was "typical"; and if a novel such as *The Gi-*

ant Joshua supported that conclusion, it only strengthened their conclusions. One reader wrote to Whipple,

*Strangely, in THE GIANT JOSHUA you have written the life story of my antecedents. Or it may be that there was not so much difference in all of them. My own grandfather was married to both a 'Sheba and a Clory; my other grandfather was married to a Willie.<sup>49</sup>*

From polygamous descendants to other Mormons struggling to understand polygamy, a doctrine so foreign to their understanding of marriage, to other readers with a curiosity about Mormons, *The Giant Joshua* seemed to answer all of their questions in historically accurate images.

What, then, is the relationship between history and literature? While they are two separate disciplines, using very different methods, there are procedures to understand history as literature and literature as history. The study of literature and history can help us see that at times "it is useful to see our pioneer grandmother in multiple"<sup>50</sup> so that we can understand the similarities of experiences. At the same time it is important to remember that "different people, at different times and places, perceive the world differently;"<sup>51</sup> there is virtue in understanding the uniqueness of individuals and in exercising enough discipline to avoid transferring novels' characters from "a genuine sense of human possibilities" into "accurate representation[s] of real[ities]."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jessie L. Embry is the Oral History Program Director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University and executive secretary of the Mormon History Association. She is the author of *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987) and has published numerous articles and presented papers on Mormon polygamy. This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 27 January 1990 at Westminster College, Salt Lake City and was published in *Sunstone* 14 (April 1990): 42-46.

<sup>2</sup>*History and the Contemporary Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 25-26, 31-32.

<sup>3</sup>*Real and Imagined Worlds: The Novel and Social Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 161.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: MacMillan co., 1961 ed.), 89-91.

<sup>5</sup>"Saints, Sinners, and Scribes: A Look at the Mormons in Fiction," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 36 (Winter 1968): 64.

<sup>6</sup>*The Giant Joshua* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1941). Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>7</sup>*Public Opinion*, 151.

<sup>8</sup>*The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 188.

<sup>9</sup>Review of *The Fancher Train* by Amelia Bean," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 27 (October 1959): 416-17.

<sup>10</sup>Letter to John Ford, 16 February 1949, Maurine Whipple Papers (uncatalogued), Manuscript Division, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Whipple Papers.) The collection is in the process of being catalogued and is used by permission of Dennis Rowley.

<sup>11</sup>Maryruth Bracy and Linda Lambert, "Maurine Whipple's Story of *The Giant Joshua*," *Dialogue* 6 (Autumn-Winter 1971): 59.

<sup>12</sup>Letter to Maurine Whipple, 1 February 1938, Whipple Collection.

<sup>13</sup>Letter to Juanita Brooks, 25 February 1941, Juanita Brooks Collection, Box 1, Folder 5, Utah State Historical Society Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>14</sup>As examples of literary criticism, Bruce Jorgensen observed, "Flawed by soft pockets of anachronistic sentiment, *Joshua* poises unsteadily between popular genre of history-as-fiction... like *Gone with the Wind*, and the more... serious genre" like Willa Cather. Jorgensen, "Retrospection: *Giant Joshua*," *Sunstone* 3 (September-October 1978): 7. William A. (Bert) Wilson felt, "As a philosophical treatment of Mormon doctrine, ... the novel fails. But as a rendition of the Mormon experience, or at least part of it, it succeeds. Those of us who have read the novel have probably learned very little of Mormon philosophy. But we have had the pleasure of rubbing shoulders with real people, struggling with real problems, in a real world." "Folklore in *The Giant Joshua*," in *Proceedings of the Symposium of the Association for Mormon Letters*, 1978-79 (Salt Lake City: AML, [1980], 63. Edward A. Geary explained, "*The Giant Joshua* despite its faults... is a powerful and moving novel which is accessible to both Mormons and non-Mormons." "The Poetics of Provincialism: Mormon Regional Fiction," *Dialogue* 11 (Summer 1978): 22. Despite literary misgivings, most reviewers praised the novel's historical information. In a contemporary review, Ray B. West, Jr., commented, "The author has followed historical fact with admirable accuracy." "Mormon Story," *Saturday Review of Literature* 23 (January 4, 1941): 5. Bruce Jorgensen felt, "Certainly few other Mormon novels match [*The Giant Joshua*'] historical scope and solidity." "Retrospection," 7. Only Elder Widstoe attacked *Joshua*'s historical accuracy. John A. Widstoe, "On the Book Rack: *The Giant Joshua*," *Improvement Era* 44 (February 1941), 93.

<sup>15</sup>"On the Book Rack," 93.

<sup>16</sup>"The Poetics of Provincialism," 22.

- <sup>17</sup>Bruce Jorgensen, "Retrospection: Giant Joshua," *Sunstone* 3 (September-October 1978): 7; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Fictional Sisters," *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*, edited by Claudia L. Bushman (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press Limited, 1976), 254.
- <sup>18</sup>Jorgensen, "Retrospection," 7.
- <sup>19</sup>*Isn't One Wife Enough?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1954), 56-57.
- <sup>20</sup>Stephanie Smith Goodson, "Plural Wives," in Bushman, *Mormon Sisters*, 105.
- <sup>21</sup>*This Is the Place: Utah* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 138-39.
- <sup>22</sup>Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough*, 447. See also Jessie L. Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 137-50.
- <sup>23</sup>Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families*, 142-46.
- <sup>24</sup>Kathryn Smoot Caldwell, *The Principle* (Salt Lake City: Randall Books, 1983), 13.
- <sup>25</sup>Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families*, 34.
- <sup>26</sup>Nels Anderson, *Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 400.
- <sup>27</sup>Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (reprint ed., Avon, Conn.: Heritage Press, 1972), 75.
- <sup>28</sup>Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families*, 34-36.
- <sup>29</sup>Photocopies of the notes James Hulett took during his interviews are available in the Kimball Young Collection, Manuscript Division, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
- <sup>30</sup>Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families*, 73-82; Whipple, *The Giant Joshua*, 118-19.
- <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 90-94, 101-102.
- <sup>32</sup>"The Female World of Love and Ritual Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, edited by Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin Press, 1978), 339.
- <sup>33</sup>The information about Whipple's family is from family group sheets submitted as part of a four-generation program of the LDS Church, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- <sup>34</sup>Edward A. Geary, "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s," *BYU Studies* 18 (Fall 1977): 92.
- <sup>35</sup>England, "Whipple's *Giant Joshua*: The Greatest but Not the Great Mormon Novel," manuscript, 19-20. Photocopy of typescript in my possession.
- <sup>36</sup>Whipple, *This is the Place*, 138.
- <sup>37</sup>Bracy and Lambert, "Maurine Whipple's Story," 59.
- <sup>38</sup>Virginia Sorensen, *A Little Lower than the Angels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942).
- <sup>39</sup>Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review* 22 (Summer 1968): 244-48.
- <sup>40</sup>Geary, "Mormondom's Lost Generation," 93-94.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 94.
- <sup>42</sup>Virginia Sorensen, "Is it True? The Novelist and His [sic] Materials," *Western Humanities Review* 7 (1953): 291.
- <sup>43</sup>Anderson, *Desert Saints*, preface.
- <sup>44</sup>Bracy and Lambert, "Maurine Whipple's Story," 60-61.
- <sup>45</sup>Maurine Whipple, Letter to John Crowe Ransom, editor of the *Kenyon Review*, 6 November 1957, Whipple Collection.
- <sup>46</sup>Whipple, *This Is the Place: Utah*, 166.
- <sup>47</sup>Whipple, Letter to Ransom.
- <sup>48</sup>Maud F. Reiser, Letter to Maurine Whipple, 12 March 1941, Whipple Collection.
- <sup>49</sup>Mrs. Isabel Moyle, Letter to Maurine Whipple, 1 June 1942, Whipple Collection.
- <sup>50</sup>Ulrich, "Fictional Sisters," 242.
- <sup>51</sup>Arthur G. Miller, *In the Eye of the Beholder* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), 7.

# Whatever Happened to Maurine Whipple?

Katherine Ashton<sup>1</sup>

WHEN MAURINE WHIPPLE won the 1938 Houghton-Mifflin Prize<sup>2</sup> for her novel about plural marriage and the Mormon colonization of southern Utah, her entry, by her own account, was chosen from a field of more than 250,000 erstwhile writers.<sup>3</sup> But rather than the triumph that she thought the prize would be, it was instead one of the first of many disappointments that would be associated with the writing of *The Giant Joshua*. Because the Houghton-Mifflin prize was thought of as a real plum in literary circles, Whipple thought that she would be recognized in her home town of St. George, Utah, for her accomplishment. She was not.

In a letter to her close friend Tom Spies, she wrote "Knowing you has been worth all the anguish and disillusionment that *Joshua* has brought me."<sup>4</sup> She told me how she was ostracized by her church and her family. When *Joshua* came off the press, her father talked the postmaster out of her personal copy, read it, and pronounced it vulgar.

The reaction of Whipple's father was typical of many Mormons. In addition to dealing with the colonization of St. George, *Joshua* also dealt very forthrightly with polygamy, then still a very sensitive subject to many Latter-day Saints. Polygamy was too close to Whipple's parents' generation. Many of them were children of polygamous marriages, children who remembered the persecution they and their families had suffered at the hands of the federal government. Whipple felt that even though her subject matter was sensitive, she owed it to "her people" as she called them, "not to paint them with too white a brush."<sup>5</sup> Her affection for those early pioneers and their indomitable spirit was apparent, but Whipple believed strongly in telling

the truth; by doing so, she offended the very people she was trying so hard to immortalize without sentiment. The truth hurt.

The book was not formally banned by the Mormon Church, but John A. Widtsoe, an apostle, wrote a six-paragraph notice about the book for the *Improvement Era's* column, "On the Book Rack." Widely quoted in articles about Whipple, the review was only partially negative, primarily in the section dealing with polygamy. Unfortunately, the negative section of the review is the most often cited and probably contributed most to the Mormon audience's caution about—or downright rejection of—the book. Widtsoe called Whipple's treatment of polygamy "unfair," asserting that "there were fewer unhappy marriages under polygamy than under monogamy." According to Whipple, Widtsoe's statement damaged the Utah sales of *Joshua*. However, his comment that the "evident straining for the lurid obscures the true spirit of Mormonism, and misleads the reader," made *Joshua* the most widely circulated novel at the Salt Lake City Public Library at the time.<sup>6</sup> Not often quoted from Widtsoe's review, but interspersed with his harsh criticism, was praise of the book:

*The story of the battle with the desert and the ultimate victory of the settlers is made alive by much detail. . . . The persons of the novel, among them Erastus Snow and Brigham Young are quite clearly and consistently drawn. . .*

*One thing this novel shows is that wherever "Mormon" history is touched, situations of epic value are uncovered. Most novels dealing with "Mormon" life follow the trek across the plains; this book explores only a corner of the subsequent settlements; yet an equally fruitful field is found.<sup>7</sup>*

But the praise was not enough to counteract the criticism, and *The Giant Joshua* never became the Mormon classic that Whipple and her editors at Houghton-Mifflin hoped that it would be.

### The Author

I had read everything I could find about Whipple, but most of the information in print was about her work and not about her, or was written when the book came out in 1941. The essence of her personality was missing. Everyone I asked about her said she was senile and living in a nursing home in St. George, that I couldn't speak to her. But as the saying goes, the reports of her condition were greatly exaggerated. The only accuracy in the rumor was her age. Maurine Whipple was eighty-three years old (or eighty-five, depending on the source) in January of this year (1990).

Karl Brooks, mayor of St. George, finally directed me to Maurine. He is the son of Juanita Brooks, well-known historian and long-time friend of Maurine Whipple. Brooks, who remembered Whipple primarily from his childhood, described her as "smiling, red-haired, and rather high-strung." In a biography written when *Joshua* came out, she was described as "vivacious."<sup>8</sup> Mayor Brooks added the word "charming." Brooks gave me Maurine's phone number but added that he didn't think she was well enough to talk to anyone.<sup>9</sup>

### Her Lifestyle

Maurine is currently living in a retirement home in St. George. The Meadows is an attractive, white brick building with brown trim, divided into individual apartments for the residents. Meals can be taken in a communal dining hall or brought to the residents' rooms. Maurine lives with an obese cat named Kitty who has been with her since he was a kitten and to whom she just never got around to giving a real name.<sup>10</sup>

Her apartment is small but comfortable, the large coffee table stacked with books and papers. She spends most of her time reading, but that pastime is becoming more and more difficult because

of cataracts in both eyes. She did mention that she was reading and enjoying Levi Peterson's *The Backslider*.

Because of a serious illness from which she was not expected to recover, Maurine had a legal guardian, Carol Jensen, appointed several years ago. The two had met when Maurine was a patient in the local hospital where Carol was a nurse. The relationship has always been more one of friendship than of guardian and ward. Carol lives close to the retirement home and the two take frequent trips into the countryside in her car.

Carol is Maurine's watchdog; she protects her privacy and her interests most voraciously. When I called Carol to see if I could talk to Maurine, she spent more than an hour grilling me, asking who I was, why I needed this information, and precisely what I was going to do with the information once I got it. Once satisfied that my purpose was legitimate, she went to great lengths to arrange a meeting.

### First Meeting

That first meeting was one I will always remember. I walked into Maurine's tiny apartment, not sure what was going to happen. Carol had warned me that Maurine was not an early riser and was not at all happy about being routed out of bed at what she thought was an outrageous hour (10 A.M.). When I got there, she was sitting in an arm chair at the bar in her kitchen, glaring at a bowl of oatmeal. Breakfast is another part of life that Maurine does not appreciate.

In the traditional peacemaking gesture, I quickly handed over the gifts I had brought: a box of Cummings chocolates and copies of the *Saturday Review* with Maurine on the cover and a *Time* magazine review of *Joshua* which also had featured her, both issues dating from the time *Joshua* was published.<sup>11</sup> My offerings broke the ice. I was invited to sit down, was warmly greeted by Kitty in a flurry of shedding cat hair, and Maurine began to talk into my tape recorder.

The talk was rambling; as she said, "I keep jumping around," but it was lucid and frequently entertaining. Maurine is a consummate storyteller. Be-



cause she is, her guardian warned me that she might embellish fact for the sake of the story. In recent events, I sometimes recognized that what I was hearing was more story than fact. Stories about the old days were very close to what I had been able to glean from her correspondence, a voluminous one which fills three large boxes containing some seventy file folders in the BYU archives.

## Yaddo

Maurine reminisced for most of the morning with prompting by me as I tried to steer the conversation to get the information that wasn't in any of the biographical material I had read. I was very interested in the time she spent at Yaddo, evidently a very lonely one for her. Her editor at Houghton-Mifflin, Ferris Greenslet, had arranged for her to spend time there. Yaddo was and is an artist's colony near Saratoga, New York, that has sheltered the likes of Katherine Anne Porter and John Cheever. It provides talented creative people with the time and place to work without interruption. An invitation to stay at Yaddo is the ultimate stamp of legitimacy for blossoming artists in literature, music, dance, and art.

While many of Greenslet's letters to Maurine made it apparent that he wanted her to stay there, it was also evident that she was miserable. In one of his letters to her, he said that he was "sorry for [her] loneliness, but. . . should judge from my experience that pain is very favorable to successful literary composition."<sup>12</sup> At Yaddo, all the writers were provided with cottages in which to write. Maurine said she didn't like the seclusion of her cottage so Miss Elizabeth Ames, the director, let her write in the main house, in a ballroom complete with minstrel gallery. Much of *The Giant Joshua* was completed at Yaddo, even though the isolation dictated by Yaddo's rules (no visiting until after 4 P.M.) was difficult for Maurine.

When I asked her to tell me about it, Maurine remembered Yaddo well—the history of the place, why it was built, for whom it was built, and how strict Miss Ames was—except with her. Her description of Yaddo contained information identical to that which I found in an article written for *Publish-*

*ers Weekly* on the occasion of Yaddo's sixtieth birthday. Maurine had particularly remembered some large chairs in the music room that looked like thrones; the writer of the article described the same chairs.<sup>13</sup>

## Ferris Greenslet

Ferris Greenslet (or F.G., as Maurine called him) wrote wonderfully encouraging letters to Maurine all during the time she was writing *Joshua*. She seemed to need his support and encouragement, and F.G. seemed more than willing to supply whatever she needed. His affection for and patience with her was apparent in his letters, as was his respect for her ability. Maurine dedicated *Joshua* to Ferris Greenslet. To this day, she calls him one of the best. "He was an old man when I knew him, but he couldn't wait to meet me," she told me. "He was a wonderful editor."

## The Men in Her Life

I asked Maurine about the men in her life, particularly about Dr. Tom Spies, whom she had met when she was on an autograph tour of the East after *Joshua* was published. Her word for their meeting was "uncanny."

*I was supposed to meet him at a lunch given by Mrs. Doubleday. As I was getting ready, there was a knock at my door and he was standing there. He told me he thought I might just as well meet him there as at the lunch, and then we could walk to the dining room together. After the lunch, he rented a buggy and we went for a ride in Central Park; after the ride we walked in the snow. It was cold and he picked up my hand and put it in his pocket. He was a very romantic man. He invented vitamins, you know.*

I didn't know, but Maurine was close. Spies was famous, not for inventing vitamins, but for his research in the use of multivitamins in treating pellagra and other vitamin deficiency diseases. Maurine also told me that she had read about Spies in the *Reader's Digest* long before she met him. *Time* did an article in 1946 on his work in diet and vitamin

research; so did *Collier's* in 1948. Paul de Kruif's *Life Among the Doctors* was written primarily about Tom Spies and his multivitamin research.<sup>14</sup> All of these writers described Spies as a charming and gregarious man, a generous man who, according to his full-column obituary in the *New York Times*, "was said never to have accepted a fee from his patients." He was, it continued, "a bachelor who called home a hotel room in any city where he was engaged in medical research."<sup>15</sup>

Maurine describes Spies as the only man she ever really loved. When I asked about other men in her life the answer was an enigmatic smile and an, "Oh, yes. But Tom was the only man I ever really loved and he was married to his work."

Her letters to Spies are unabashedly passionate. Undated, the copies in the archives seem to be worksheets to help her decide what she was going to say to this man whom she loved so much. Written in pencil on newsprint, the letter drafts are a record of those long ago feelings that were not returned in kind. Spies's letters to Whipple are closer to telegrams. They were all dictated and some even begin with the salutation: "Dear Miss Whipple." From the letters that Whipple wrote Spies, it seems that Maurine Whipple and Tom Spies were lovers. They met many times over the course of several years, but Maurine believes now that Tom Spies would not have made a good husband. "He didn't have time for marriage in his life; he didn't know how to have fun."

But her letters state that she wasn't interested in legalizing their relationship by marriage. All she wanted was to maintain the relationship, to see him whenever she could. She told him that she was not the kind of woman who needed the security of marriage.<sup>16</sup>

### *Her Relationship with the LDS Church*

I asked about her relationship with the LDS church, reading to her an excerpt from a letter to her agent in New York while she was supposed to be writing the sequel to *Joshua*:

*If you will remember I told you I couldn't do the book in St. George. But in New York, I didn't suspect things would be as bad as they were out here. I have told you over and over that I don't live in America. That statement is truer than you would believe—anywhere outside of Nazi Germany. Before, I had always written in a little room in the Public Library. When I got home last fall the local mayor called upon me to tell me that I could no longer have the room, that he "hated my guts," and asked me to leave town. He had been visited by a member of the Mormon church hierarchy who was incensed over my book This is the Place—specifically, the passage wherein I said Utah had no free speech. Time has vindicated that book but last fall everybody went crazy and I was the object of their craziness. If you've never been the object of mob psychology—don't.*<sup>17</sup>

Maurine still feels persecuted by the Church. She found it hard to believe when I told her that *Joshua* was being taught at BYU in a class on the American novel. She told me that she had never been through the temple and had no plans to do so in spite of pressure from various members of the Church. She quoted Curtis Taylor, the future publisher of her "Lost Works," as telling her in a letter that she should see her bishop about her endowments.

Maurine still has bitter memories of former counselor in the First Presidency J. Reuben Clark—at least, she thinks it was he. She says that he told her that he didn't like anything she did. She remembers that she looked him in the eye and said that she thought that everything he did was wonderful. As she recalls the incident, President Clark was rendered speechless by her retort. She also feels that Clark was influential in keeping Utah sales of *This Is the Place—Utah* as poor as they were by refusing to let Z.C.M.I. carry the book. Maurine even thought that Clark phoned Houghton-Mifflin in Boston and tried to persuade them to suppress the book because it didn't present a flattering picture of Mormons.

A comment she repeated over and over during our interview was that one of the things she likes the least about all organized religions—not just the Mormons—is the lack of humor in most sermons. "You have to be able to laugh, especially about your-

self." Maurine has retained that ability to laugh although her life has not been easy over the last few years.

For instance, there have been rumors floating around for several years that Maurine Whipple never wrote the sequel to *The Giant Joshua* because she was an alcoholic. Maurine vehemently denies that there is any truth in those rumors, and I believe her. She had a brother who had problems with alcohol, and the rumors may have begun because, in the early sixties, Maurine attempted to set up a foundation for the treatment of alcoholism in Las Vegas. She felt that a place like Las Vegas had a need for such a treatment center simply because of the environment there. Unfortunately, she was never able to secure adequate funding for her foundation, and it was never built.

### St. George

Maurine has a real and abiding affection for St. George. She knows the town and the surrounding countryside very well and knows many tales about the people who live there. She and her guardian insisted on taking me on a tour of St. George, Hurricane, and an old Mormon fort at Pipe Springs—some two hours from St. George—one of their favorite places. The day we were there, the fort was deserted except for a few tourists and a gaggle of resident geese. The spring pours into a pond now, and Maurine sat on a bench by the pond in the shade of some huge old cottonwood trees and reminisced about her reporting days.

Look, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Science Digest*, and *Collier's* all commissioned her to do stories on the Arizona Strip.<sup>18</sup> She especially remembered staying overnight in the Arizona town of Colorado City, entirely composed of polygamous families. During the fifties, the then-governor of Arizona put all the men from Short Creek (since renamed Colorado City) in prison. He also separated the children from their parents and took them into protective custody. Understandably, these actions caused considerable uproar at the time.

Maurine stayed in the town to cover the story and, because there were no hotels, lodged overnight with one of the families. She recalled that the woman

with whom she was sleeping woke her in the night screaming "I see blood." When Maurine questioned the woman the next day, she replied that she was terrified of the consequences of the raid, fearing blood atonement. Maurine thought that the persecution of these families was terrible and recalls that she so informed the governor.

### Film Rights

Maurine had hoped that a film of *The Giant Joshua* would make the last few years of her life financially easy. She had sold the film rights as an option several years ago, but nothing had been done when the time limit ran out. When that effort failed, she then sold the film rights outright. The prospective producers have tabled their efforts for the time being for lack of backing. She was told by the current owners of the film rights that *Joshua* will be a blockbuster of a film—a Mormon *Gone with the Wind*; they want to wait until they can make a film of which both she and they can be proud.

Maurine was informed by a family friend who works for Redford Enterprises that Robert Redford will direct because *Joshua* is the one book that he would most like to see made into a film. Maurine wants very much to believe this because she is a big Redford fan, but there has been no verification of this information either by the prospective producers or Redford Enterprises.

The money Maurine received for the film rights to *Joshua* is gone. Her home was taken from her when a former caretaker went into bankruptcy. She and the caretaker had an agreement: in return for Maurine's physical care, the caretaker was given the deed to Maurine's house which Maurine owned free and clear. When the caretaker declared bankruptcy, the home and its contents (all of which still belonged to Maurine) were put up for sale. The sale of the film rights brought her the only income she has had over the last few years. She has always been self-employed. Never having paid into social security, she doesn't qualify for benefits. To receive state aid, she must leave the retirement home and go into an acute care facility. She was placed in such a facility a few years ago when she was in need of

skilled medical care and, according to her guardian, became very depressed. But there seems to be no other solution at the moment. Maurine has no close family. Her guardian has agonized over the decision, but sees no alternative.

## Conclusion

Critics Eugene England, Curtis Taylor, Bruce Jorgensen, and Patricia Aikins have called *The Giant Joshua* "arguably the best LDS novel ever written."<sup>19</sup> Maurine saw it as the first book of a trilogy. I feel that Maurine never finished the trilogy because of anger: anger at the Mormon community which rejected her work, anger at her family for not supporting her, and anger at the literary community which seemed to forget her for so many years.

So, you don't have to wonder as I did: Whatever happened to Maurine Whipple? She is alive, albeit elderly, a little wobbly but otherwise well, living in obscurity with her colorful memories and Kitty in St. George.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Katherine Ashton is a freelance writer who lives and works in Salt Lake City. This paper was presented at the 1990 annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters at Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah and published in *Sunstone*, 14, no. 2 (April 1990). She expresses appreciation to Professors Patricia Aikins of Westminster College and Eugene England of Brigham Young University for sharing unpublished material, Dennis Rowley, Senior Librarian of Brigham Young University for his help with the Maurine Whipple Collection, and Professor Steven Haslam of Westminster College for reading the paper in her absence at the annual meeting. Enormously helpful was Kayla Willey, Correspondence Register, 11 December 1986, Maurine Whipple Collection of Personal and Professional Papers, Western Americana Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

<sup>2</sup>"They offer you a sum of money—it's \$2500 now, it was \$1500 then—to an unknown writer for an unknown book. They gamble it and they give you a percentage of the royalties." Maurine Whipple, quoted in Maryruth Bracy and Linda Lambert, "Maurine Whipple's Story of *The Giant Joshua*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6 (Autumn-Winter 1971): 57.

<sup>3</sup>Maurine Whipple to Jerry Jones 1973, 2. Photocopy of letter provided to me by Eugene England, English Department, Brigham Young University.

<sup>4</sup>Maurine Whipple, Letter to Tom Douglas Spies, n.d., Maurine Whipple Collection of Personal and Professional Papers, Western Americana Archives, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Whipple Collection).

<sup>5</sup>Preface to the 1940 edition of *The Giant Joshua* (Salt Lake City: Western Epics, Inc., 1976).

<sup>6</sup>Curtis Taylor, "The Giant Joshua and Latter-day Fiction," *LDS Booksellers Association Newsletter*, February 1989, 6.

<sup>7</sup>John A. Widtsoe, "On the Book Rack: The Giant Joshua," *Improvement Era* 44, no. 2 (February 1941): 93.

<sup>8</sup>"Maurine Whipple," *Current Biography*, 1941, p. 912.

<sup>9</sup>Telephone conversation, 31 March 1989, notes in my possession.

<sup>10</sup>Maurine Whipple, interviewed 4 April 1989, St. George, Utah, audiotape recording in my possession. Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotations from Whipple are from this interview.

<sup>11</sup>Ray B. West, Review of *The Giant Joshua* by Maurine Whipple, *Saturday Review*, 4 January 1941, 5; Review of *The Giant Joshua* by Maurine Whipple, *Time*, 6 January 1941, 59.

<sup>12</sup>Greenslet, Letter to Maurine Whipple, 25 July 1939, Whipple Collection.

<sup>13</sup>Roy Bongartz, "Yaddo at 60," *Publishers Weekly*, 13 June 1986, 35.

<sup>14</sup>"Miracle Man," *Time*, 12 August 1946, 89; Dickson Hartwell, "The Miracles of Dr. Spies," *Collier's*, 31 January 1948, 21-26; Paul DeKruif, *Life Among the Doctors* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949).

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Spies, obituary notice, *New York Times*, 29 February 1960.

<sup>16</sup>Whipple, Letter to Spies, n.d., Whipple Collection.

<sup>17</sup>Maurine Whipple, Letter to Maximilian Becker, St. George, Utah, 3 November 1946, Whipple Collection.

<sup>18</sup>Ann Jarrell, "A Partial Bibliography on Maurine Whipple," paper for Literature of Mormonism 614 class; photocopy of typescript in my possession, courtesy of Victor Purdy.

<sup>19</sup>Eugene England, "Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*: A Literary History of Mormonism's Best Historical Fiction," 1989, photocopy of typescript in my possession; Taylor, "The Giant Joshua and Latter-day Fiction," 6-7; Bruce Jorgensen, "Retrospection: Giant Joshua," *Sunstone* 3, no. 6 (September/October 1978): 6-8; Patricia Aikins, "Geography of the Heart," *Journal of Regional Studies*, forthcoming. All four used the identical phrase, but I believe it was first Eugene England's.

# The Promise Is Fulfilled: Literary Aspects of John D. Fitzgerald's Novels

Audrey M. Godfrey<sup>1</sup>

JOHN D. FITZGERALD PRODUCED a bibliography of over three hundred publications; yet in Utah where he was born, the literary community has rarely commented on his work. Because his books appeal chiefly to children, they are basically unknown to the state's over-thirty citizens, most of whom wrongly associate his name with the writer of *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald. At his passing in May 1988, only an obituary in the *Salt Lake Tribune* acknowledged the event. Yet to thousands of youthful readers in the United States, England, and Germany he is a well known author. The Great Brain character in Fitzgerald's series for children is as familiar as Tom Sawyer to these young people.

Fitzgerald's name evokes some recognition when coupled with the title of his book *Papa Married a Mormon*, however.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this first book made its initial appearance in *McCall's* magazine in 1955 and later became a bestseller for Prentice-Hall and a selection of two book clubs. *Mamma's Boarding House* and *Uncle Will and the Fitzgerald Curse* followed soon after.<sup>3</sup> Though not greeted as enthusiastically by reviewers as the first novel, they, too, had national recognition.

Fitzgerald also wrote two textbooks on creative writing with Robert C. Meredith: *The Professional Storywriter and His Art* (1963) and *Structuring Your Novel: From Basic Idea to Finished Manuscript* (1972).<sup>4</sup> Craftsman articles on writing have appeared in *Writers Digest*, and numerous articles and fiction were printed in a variety of magazines.

With these publications to his credit, why are John D. Fitzgerald's books not regarded as worthy examples of regional literature? Partial reasons may be that he left the state at age eighteen, he did not participate in its literary scene, and he was not a

Mormon. But a more likely reason for his lack of critical recognition is the lack of sophistication in his writings.

Born in Price, Utah, in 1907 to a Scandinavian Mormon mother and an Irish Catholic father, he grew up influenced by both cultures. He left Utah behind at age eighteen, working at such varied jobs as playing in a jazz band, working in a bank, and serving as an overseas newspaper correspondent. At the time of his first break into the national literary scene, he was a purchaser for a steel company in California.

To relax in the evenings he began *Papa Married a Mormon* as a family history about his boyhood. He said, "I was dumbfounded when it was accepted by Prentice-Hall and even more dumbfounded when it became a best seller."<sup>5</sup>

In the tradition of the culture it depicted, five trunks of souvenirs, carefully labeled by his mother, formed the basis of the book. Its creation was a tribute to her. Possibly critics of Mormon literature find it difficult to give importance to what some have labeled as a family memoir. A *New York Times* review sniffed,

*Papa and mama talk to each other like a couple of lovers out of Godey's Lady's Book. The other family and community portrayals read like the over-sentimentalized and romanticized eulogies at a family reunion.*<sup>6</sup>

However, those who so label Fitzgerald's writing may be too hasty in their conclusions. A theory for his approach is suggested by the era of which he wrote. Victorian American literature of Papa and Mama's time depicted men as lords of their homes and women as perfect genteel models. Children were seen and not heard. Fitzgerald chooses to paint his family in a humorous pose while still imitating Vic-

torian literature with its attendant moral values. An analysis of his writing provides some evidence that it is so.

As Fitzgerald's career progressed, his style became recognizable. Some critics compared him to the genius of Mark Twain and Bret Harte in his ability to recreate local color. His nineteenth-century Mormon village became as identifiable to readers as Harte's mining camps.

In his book, *Structuring Your Novel*, Fitzgerald discussed the regional novel and urged authors to make their settings as authentic as possible, their characters historically accurate, and events true to historical and cultural facts. Details of the plot should also reveal the characteristics of the locale.

He followed his own advice in re-creating the Mormon village of "Adenville." Its streets were wide enough to turn a span of oxen. Agriculture and mining formed its economic base:

*The flavor of Utah was everywhere as I walked along Main street. . . . Poplar, cottonwood and elm trees lined both sides of the street and the banks of the ditches, which were full of running water. Even the signs on places of business told me I couldn't be any place but Utah: The Seagull Cafe, The Bee Hive Laundry, The Deseret Meat Market.<sup>7</sup>*

The citizens had their own simple hierarchies and codes of behavior. Judge Gibson administered the law. Clergymen like Bishop Aden and Reverend Holcomb looked after individual congregations and united for important things like building a school or conducting funerals. Women delayed visiting newcomers until their curtains were hung. Picnics, dances, parades, horse racing, and church socials provided entertainment.

In my opinion, Fitzgerald's use of local color follows the great tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hamlin Garland, John Steinbeck, and Harper Lee. As suggested in his own discussions of regional writing, this genre's chief interest lies in the peculiarities of the place and the persons who live there.<sup>8</sup> Plot is secondary. Indeed, Fitzgerald's novels resemble a compilation of short stories that achieve their unity through the reappearance of their vig-

orous central characters. But the theme of goodness in individuals and community is strong throughout.

Fitzgerald's depiction of the Mormon community differed from those of contemporaries who recreated this environment. In contrast to Whipple's power-hungry ecclesiastical leaders, Fitzgerald emphasized Bishop Aden's ecumenical concern for his flock and its non-Mormon neighbors:

*Bishop Ephraim Aden, the founder of Adenville, had been one of Papa's dearest friends. The Bishop, a man of great understanding, tolerance and wisdom . . . gave both temporal and spiritual advice to the Saints; he officiated at dances—settled both marital and civil disputes among the Saints. Bishop Aden was like a loving grandfather, and the Gentiles in town loved him as much as the Mormons did.<sup>9</sup>*

Conspicuous by their absence are pretty young girls, longing to escape small-town repressions and find themselves. Women in Adenville are absorbed in service to family and friends. There is no cheating in the shadows, no dishonesty by the supposed righteous. Conflict to hold reader interest comes from children who are testing family values. Though these tests are always resolved in an acceptable manner, the reader has time to question his or her own feelings of right and wrong. In the current literary environment which sometimes rewards poor choices, a whiff of Fitzgerald's Victorian world can be refreshing.

After his early success in the national market, Fitzgerald began writing his Great Brain books. He later recalled that he had never thought of writing a book for children until one evening when friends dropped in and began to reminisce about their childhoods. Fitzgerald told them some stories about his brother, Tom (the Great Brain). They laughed so much his wife suggested he write a book about Tom. Dell Publishers brought out *The Great Brain* in 1969, followed by six more volumes of boyhood adventures featuring this keen-witted Fitzgerald.

These books resemble a chat around the fire-side. Conversations flow easily as story after story is told, each one getting more outlandish. In one of

these tales, John is trying to get the mumps before his brothers. In the past, whenever one boy became ill Mamma put the other children to bed with him so they could all get it and have it over with. The story describes John's efforts to catch the disease from a friend by creeping into his room in great secrecy and asking him to breathe on him. He describes his satisfaction that when he is almost over the mumps, Tom and Sweyn will just be getting sick. Every morning he checks the mirror to see if signs of the illness are apparent yet. When the symptoms finally appear, Sweyn and Tom are furious that he purposely exposed himself just to be able to give it to them.<sup>10</sup> Fitzgerald's engaging ability to spin a yarn is as satisfying as hearing the best storyteller at a family reunion.

Fitzgerald strove in these books to have Tom bring out some moral point. For example, in *The Great Brain Reforms*, Tom dreams up a scheme involving tin cans where he tricked his friends into betting money and toys against his prowess as a hypnotist. After the children lost quarters and personal belongings to him, some of the parents called Tom's mother and complained. Tom avoided punishment by convincing his parents that he had performed a great service in teaching kids that gambling brought sorrow, heartache, and disgrace.<sup>11</sup>

Reviewer John Robert Sorfleet identified other lessons in this series. He saw in Tom's money-loving impulse a metaphor for the capitalist element in American society. Yet Tom also depicted the ethical sense of the people, "compassion for one's fellow man, the kind of cooperative neighbourliness which did much to build American society." Continually, Tom's drive to exploit his friends financially collided with his upbringing which taught him to be kind. Sorfleet thought the books were "quintessentially American: the profit motive and the ethic of helplessness [sic] mutually reinforcing one another," and held together by the democratic ideal.<sup>12</sup>

Sorfleet may have read more into Fitzgerald than the author intended. Fitzgerald never claimed the level of metaphor for his books; rather he presented them as reminiscent of his youth and morally valuable.<sup>13</sup>

John D. Fitzgerald's writings are instructive of early Mormon village life and beautiful in the feelings they recall. They tell how a community worked together to build dams, create a lively economy, and educate their children in an atmosphere of close-knit associations with neighbors. They are as accurate in this depiction as the family memoirs with which they are compared. They cause us to feel good about our heritage in the re-creation of the life we hope our ancestors lived.

The books are simple enough for children to read, and an adult can complete one in an evening. But their lucidity is deceptive, for the characters are complex individuals. Mamma is a small-town Mormon girl who defied her parents and community to marry a Catholic. But her goodness and determination to succeed as a wife, a daughter, and as a caring individual eventually brought her love and acceptance from the very people she defied. Mamma worked hard at being the kind of self she desired. Fitzgerald shows her always succeeding, but not without effort. After her husband died, she decided to take in boarders against the wishes of her children. They suggested she move to a smaller home where they could care for her, but she resolutely told them,

*I know that because you are dutiful and loving children you will visit me after all of you are married. And you will bring my grandchildren to see me, but I will not spend the rest of my life watching out a window, hoping, praying and waiting for my children and grandchildren to visit me. I must make a new life for myself.<sup>14</sup>*

This excerpt reveals a strong Victorian woman but also reminds us of the modern self-sufficient feminist.

Then there is Thomas, her husband, who has stolen her from her parents. His brother is a saloonkeeper and he could have been despised by the Mormon community because of this. But he, too, is a complex person. He is smart enough and good enough to see how to aid his neighbors, and he implements these ideas, building bridges of

friendship. He fathers wisely, yet his children know him as an imperfect being who gets lost occasionally and who needs their assistance often.

Finally, there is the Great Brain who, as mentioned, seems to be two people—a conniver who takes advantage of others, and a doer like his father who knows how to remedy problems. These two personalities struggle for outlet, sometimes colliding but most frequently benefiting the community.

The novels alternate between excellence and sentimentality, hallmarks of the Victorian storyteller. But Fitzgerald's purpose of depicting life's peculiarities and people in an interesting and humorous way with its attending moral message, is as good a reason for consideration by the Utah literary community as any.

In the foreword to *Papa Married a Mormon*, Fitzgerald says he promised his mother that he would write a story about "the little people who built the West," a regional story, if you will. He ends his introduction:

*Now, there are left only the tombstones, man's briefest biographies.*

*Now, there are left only the diaries, the turning of each musty page like the opening of a door into a long vacant room.*

*Now, there are left only the newspapers, jaundiced and brittle with age.*

*Now, there are left only the love letters, faded and so crisp they crumble even at a loving touch.*

*Now, there are left only the failing memories of the very aged.*

*Now, there are left only the skeletons rattling in the family closet.*

*But now the promise is fulfilled.<sup>15</sup>*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Audrey M. Godfrey has an M.A. in history from Utah State University and has published and presented papers on Mormon women, the Mountain Meadows massacre, the Utah Expedition, songs of the Utah War, and Indian women. This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 28 January 1989 at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah.

<sup>2</sup>*Papa Married a Mormon* (1955; reprint ed., Salt Lake City: Western Epics, 1976). *McCall*, November and December 1985.

<sup>3</sup>*Mamma's Boarding House* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958); *Uncle Will and the Fitzgerald Curse* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961).

<sup>4</sup>Robert C. Meredith and John D. Fitzgerald, *The Professional Storywriter and His Art* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, Co., 1963) and *Structuring Your Novel: From Basic Idea to Finished Manuscript* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1972).

<sup>5</sup>Anne Comire, ed., *Something About the Author*, Volume 20 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980) 57.

<sup>6</sup>Frances C. Locher, ed., *Contemporary Authors*, Volumes 93-96 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980), 152.

<sup>7</sup>*Mamma's Boarding House* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958) 12-13.

<sup>8</sup>Meredith and Fitzgerald, *Structuring Your Novel*, 150.

<sup>9</sup>*Mama's Boarding House*, 3.

<sup>10</sup>*The Great Brain* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1967) 32-42.

<sup>11</sup>*The Great Brain Reforms* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), 19-32.

<sup>12</sup>John Robert Sorfleet, "John Dennis Fitzgerald," in *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, edited by D. L. Kirkpatrick (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983) 291.

<sup>13</sup>*John D. Fitzgerald . . . American Author*, videotape (Salt Lake City: The Great Brain Enterprise, 1987), copy in my possession.

<sup>14</sup>*Mama's Boarding House*, 92.

<sup>15</sup>*Papa Married a Mormon*, viii.



# Realizing "A Personal and *Possessed* Past": Mormon Community and Values in Wallace Stegner's *Recapitulation*

Richard H. Cracroft<sup>1</sup>

IN HIS CAREFULLY CRAFTED and distinguished novel, *Recapitulation* (1979), Wallace Stegner, Iowa-born, Saskatchewan-reared, but Utah-formed, joins his protagonist Bruce Mason on a brief visit to Salt Lake City, some forty-five years after leaving home. The seventy-ish Mason, now a successful lawyer, distinguished internationalist and former ambassador, returns to the city of his youth and young manhood to arrange for the burial of his Aunt Margaret. To his surprise, his gentle return to Zion releases, through an outpouring of nostalgia, memories, dreams and fantasies, the ghosts of unresolved conflicts which have haunted him, consciously and subconsciously, from those early years.

It is evident to those familiar with Stegner's life and works that Bruce Mason is a fictional rendering of the elemental Stegner, who, despite his frequent insistence that his work is not primarily autobiographical,<sup>2</sup> has in fact been "preoccupied, in much of his very best writing," as Forrest G. Robinson has demonstrated, "with the intimate details of his own life."<sup>3</sup> It is a double welcome home, then, when, in *Recapitulation*, Stegner returns to the family saga of Harry (Bo) and Elsa Mason and their two sons Chet and Bruce, whose story Stegner originally chronicled in his 1943 classic, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. For the most part a fictional recasting and examination of the lives of George and Hilda Stegner and their sons, Cecil and Wallace, the earlier novel is, Stegner admits, "family history reasonably straight."<sup>4</sup>

In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner first evokes the theme to which he has since often returned—the elegiac celebration of the mythic West—symbolized in the Big Rock Candy Moun-

tain itself—in contrast with the mundane, even ugly and vulgar realities of the sterile Western present. Fictionally, this dichotomy is often embodied in the tension between what Stegner has called, in his essay, "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," the "man-wilderness and woman-civilization" theme, in which the "freedom-loving, roving man and the civilized woman" duel for power in a paradoxical conflict in which the winner must also lose something of value.<sup>5</sup> Stegner embodies this conflict in the lives of Bo Mason—independent, irresponsible and restively energetic, and Elsa Mason—domestic, gentle, and cultivated, and portrays their struggle as a symbolic one, "a kind of temple," notes Robinson, "for the measurement and understanding of western American history."<sup>6</sup>

This tension is underscored at the end of the novel, as Bruce Mason reflects, while standing at the grave of his suicide-murderer father:

*Perhaps it took several generations to make a man, perhaps it took several combinations and recreations of his mother's gentleness and resilience, his father's enormous energy and appetite for the new, a subtle blending of masculine and feminine, selfish and selfless, stubborn and yielding, before a proper man could be fashioned.*

*He was the only one left to fulfill the contract and try to justify the labor and the harshness and the mistakes of his parents' lives, and that responsibility was . . . clearly his.<sup>7</sup>*

In *Recapitulation*, published in Stegner's seventieth year, the author recapitulates, from the consistory of history, how Bruce Mason, the survivor, impressively successful but symbolically sterile (unlike Stegner, Mason has, significantly, never

married), returns to Salt Lake City and, at last, to the graves of his parents and brother, to fulfill that contract.

As in most of his fiction, Stegner presents in *Recapitulation* and *Bruce Mason* his own "essential mind or spirit,"<sup>8</sup> his own conservative and optimistic values, which he identifies as Western and "square." He artistically transforms the Mason family tensions into microcosmic reflections of what he has described as the central Western paradox. To facilitate the reconciliation of this paradox, Stegner naturally and adroitly sets the novel in a region, in a city, and among adherents of a religion, which represent, for him and his persona, Mason, a culture and a society which have been more successful than most modern societies in resolving the paradox by bridging the gap between the attractive, mythic, pioneer past, with its classic values, and the real, urban, and often ugly industrial present, with all of its chaos, relativism, and amorality.

Stegner and Mason believe, albeit grudgingly, that the Saints of Salt Lake City have, by maintaining and promoting family and community values, continued the unity and stability of the settlement era in the face of increasing secular opposition in the urban West, and have actually accomplished what regional writers have generally failed to accomplish fictively, in creating, in the present (and in a culture no longer confined to the American West), what Stegner has called the "sense of a personal and possessed past" (*Sound*, 199).

Through setting the Mason family saga and Bruce Mason's own journey toward individuation in Salt Lake City, Stegner is free to evoke not only his own, warm memories of growing up among the Mormons, but also to recall the enduring conservative, optimistic, and moral values of his literal and spiritual hometown, values with which he has a lifelong affinity. He thereby creates a frame of reference through which he and his fictional counterpart can better understand themselves and their origins and against which both of them can measure not only their progress toward reconciliation of the tensions within their real and fictive families, but, incorrigible optimists as they are and because

of the Mormon example, can suggest and measure the possibility for regional and national resolution of the destructive Western paradox.

## II

"Why the hell put a book in Salt Lake?" asked Wallace Stegner's agent, on learning of his plan to write *Recapitulation*. "I didn't see any reason why not," recalled Stegner in his 1980-81 interviews with Richard W. Etulain. "These actions and people *belonged* in Salt Lake City, not in New York City or Boston, or anywhere else." Indeed, Stegner seems to be right in claiming that, until *Recapitulation*, "Salt Lake has never, I suppose, been written about in fiction."<sup>9</sup> Of course, there are slight exceptions to this assertion, and Stegner himself had set part of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in a sketchily evoked Salt Lake City. It remained for the wandering and aging Bruce Mason, however, to use the "city of the Saints" as a rich and emotionally charged stimulus to memory, recapitulation and even reconciliation in "the museum or diorama where early versions of him were preserved" (*Reconciliation*, 128). Salt Lake City was to become for Mason, as it had earlier become for Stegner, a kind of emotional Sacred Grove, a place for self-rediscovery; and both Mason and Stegner ride various waves of nostalgia which break into floods of insight about their emotionally chaotic earlier lives in the city, lives which contrast sharply with the security and stability which Salt Lake has come to mean to both of them.

Some years ago Stegner explored, in his essay, "At Home in the Fields of the Lord," his assertion that "I have always envied people with a hometown," and concluded that, despite his being "a gentile in the New Jerusalem," his then-recent visits to Salt Lake City, enriched by the distance of "years of absence from Zion," had taught him the truth that, no longer an Ishmael, "I am as rich in a hometown as anyone" (*Sound*, 157, 159).

Salt Lake City, where Stegner lived from 1921 and thereafter for most of fifteen critical years of youth and early manhood, generates in him, as in others, a pervasive "associational emotion" often "overlooked for years, and comprehended only in

retrospect." He claims that "nostalgia, the recognition of old familiarity, is the surest way to recognize a hometown" and illustrates his point that "any place deeply lived in . . . can fill the sensory attic with images enough for a lifetime of nostalgia" (*Sound*, 161, 166), by sweeping through a spate of recollections of Salt Lake in the 1920s which recall the idyllic chapters in Twain's *Autobiography*. He ranges nostalgically "from Murray to Beck's Hot Springs, and from Saltair to Brighton and Pinecrest"; "how it was, its weathers and its lights, is very clear to me," as are the canyons of memory to the east of the city: City Creek and Dry Canyon, Parley's and Mill Creek and Little Cottonwood, for, lying in the "lap of mountains" as it does, "knowing Salt Lake City means knowing its canyons"; and knowing the city means knowing "the late-dusk smell of October on Second South and Twelfth East," with the "shine of the arc light on the split street tipping up the Second South hill"; it means, on later visits, being "all but skinless . . . as I drive down Thirteenth East Street" (*Sound*, 164-66).

In Recapitulation, Stegner renders this nostalgic "all but skinlessness" in fiction, as Bruce Mason, late in May 1977, experiences Salt Lake City through every pore. Having rounded the Oquirrh, driven past "Black Rock and the ratty beaches" and the Saltair Pavilion, Mason enters the city, nods "gravely" to Brigham Young, "the figure with the outstretched hand," and registers at the Hotel Utah (which he jarringly transposes as "Utah Hotel"), from whose familiar lobby and Roof Garden he sallies forth to find those "early versions" of himself in local color pregnant with remembrance (Recapitulation, 8-9). Mason enlivens landmarks which sweep readers from the Deseret Gym, Temple Square Hotel, and an unnamed mortuary on East South Temple, to Brigham Street Pharmacy, the Avenues, the John R. Park Building and the Circle at the University of Utah, to the Victory Park tennis courts, to some of the various Stegner/Mason family homes—across from Liberty Park on Seventh East, at Fifteenth East above East High School (where Miss Van Vliet teaches Latin in place of the real and legendary Miss Van Pelt), on Ninth East

and Fourth South, and Seventh South and Eleventh East, to cite a few. Driving slowly by many of these places during his two-day stay, his memories, says Mason, are made "instantly tangible" (121), unfolding like a sego lily before his heated imagination.

Crossing the Emigration Canyon gully on Seventeenth South and Thirteenth East late on that first evening, Mason smells the hauntingly familiar breeze and insists,

*When cottonwoods have been rattling at you all through your childhood, they mean home. . . . But one puff of wind through those trees in the gully is enough to tell me, not that I have come home, but that I never left. (123)*

The houses, buildings, and streets of the present sweep him into such idyllic recollections as this description of the morning of his commencement from the University of Utah:

*Walking along Thirteenth East Street on an absolutely perfect morning, creation morning. Perhaps there was a shower during the night, but it feels as if prehistoric Lake Bonneville has risen silently in the dark, overflowing its old beach terraces one by one, flooding the Stansbury, then the Provo, on which this street is laid, then finally the Bonneville; filling the valley to overflowing, stretching a hundred miles westward into the desert, lapping against the Wasatch, pushing long fjords into the canyons, washing away all the winter smoke, softening the alluvial gravels, rinsing and freshening every leaf of every shrub and tree, greening every blade of grass; and then before daylight has withdrawn again into its salty remnant, leaving behind this universal sparkle and brightness.*

*It is such a morning as the old remember and only the young belong in. . . .*

*At the drugstore on the Second South corner he turns right, up the slope toward where the Park Building's white marble front overlooks the Circle and the tree-dotted lawn. . . . Ahead, the sun dazzles over the roof of the Park Building. . . . The mountains beyond are backlit and featureless. (Recapitulation, 162-63)*

It is "dangerous to squeeze the tube of nostalgia," says Mason, who soon realizes he is experiencing "some sort of historical jet lag" (32, 91) which will nudge him into some unsettling confrontations with his past. For Stegner, then, Salt Lake City becomes more than a warm and pleasant bath in nostalgia. The tender evocations of the city lead to long but differently focused retellings of the Mason/Stegner family saga. It consists of both wildness (stories of his restless, bootlegging father, always one step ahead of the law, forcing his family to furtiveness, caution, and frequent unstabilizing moves) and civilization (his gentle mother, who longs for self-respect, a home, neighbors, stability). He remembers his unlucky brother, who dies an untimely death leaving a young bride and child; Joe Mulder, Mason's friend and tennis partner; first love and first jilting (Holly), his second passion (Nola) and their desultory drift into an unfulfilling sexual relationship gradually cooled by Mason's absence at law school in Minneapolis; the lingering death of his mother from cancer; the later suicide of his father, and his simultaneous murder of a woman creditor.

These generally unsettling events take place against a background of an ordered, friendly city and thus underscore the contrast between the instability of the nomadic and rootless Mason family and the stable and solid benevolence of Salt Lake City, which is, for both Mason and Stegner, a sanctuary. "And it is as sanctuary," Stegner had written earlier, in "At Home in the Fields of the Lord," "that [the city] persists even in my gentle mind and insinuates itself as my veritable hometown" (*Sound*, 167). Offering a "provincial security," as Mason calls it, Salt Lake City and its desert and mountains "wrapped closer around the valley and around him their protective isolation" and accorded him a community solidarity, which he saw and felt all around him, a Mormon security to which he aspired for himself and his family (Recapitulation, 20, 128). Joining the Boy Scouts, playing basketball in a hundred Mormon wardhouses, discovering the public library, and negotiating its public transportation stirred in young Mason "the beginning of a wary confidence" (Recapitulation, 82).

Stegner, who likewise joined the Boy Scouts, where he earned the Eagle Scout rank by participating in Mormon and Episcopalian troops and attended Mutual in various Mormon wardhouses, also found in Salt Lake City a sense of belonging, of being "a member of a society, which was actually very good for me."<sup>10</sup> And Mason, like Stegner, though occasionally irritated at its wholesome ways, and "good Mormon girls," formal public pieties, admits his affection for the city, and says, gratefully, "Didn't Salt Lake, once, save him, or let him save himself?" (Recapitulation, 35).

"I feel secure in Salt Lake City," Stegner writes, and "security," he insists elsewhere, showing his affinity with the conservative spirit of the city of his youth, "may be as great a social need as independence, stability as essential a commodity as change." Indeed, "except as we belong to a tradition and a community, we are nothing. We have no language, no history, no lore, no legend, no myth, no custom, no religion, no art, no species memory" (*Sound*, 285). Thus, returning to Salt Lake City after many years' absence affords Stegner "a satisfactory literary experience," for "the present has power to evoke a more orderly version of the past" (*Sound*, 168-69). Bruce Mason expands on this, noting that "Memory, sometimes a preservative, sometimes a censor's stamp, could also be an art form" (Recapitulation, 276), allowing the individual to shape the events of the past into an understandable present.

"Home," which for Stegner/Mason is Salt Lake City and all of the stability and security it represents amid their own family disarray, "is what you can take away with you." It is Salt Lake City which provides for both of them, "something real and good and satisfying, and the knowledge that, having had or been or lived these things," says Stegner, "I can never lose them again" (*Sound*, 169).

### III

The return of Bruce Mason and Wallace Stegner to Salt Lake City, however, also means a return to the city's Mormon inhabitants and thus to the mixed feelings which Stegner/Mason share about the Lat-

ter-day Saints. For Salt Lake City, by which he means the Mormons, is "a divided concept, a complex idea," writes Stegner. "To the devout it is more than a place; it is a way of life, a corner of the materially realizable heaven; its soil is held together by the roots of the family and the cornerstones of the temple. In this sense," Stegner adds, "Salt Lake City is forever foreign to me, as to any non-Mormon" (*Sound*, 159).

But Mormon values, the familial and communal stability of the Mormon people, are not foreign to Stegner; indeed, many of the values which he identifies as "Mormon" are values which the conservative Stegner evokes again and again in his biographies, histories, and fiction. It is through these familial and community values that he views, assesses, and judges the world. It is these "square" and Western values that he finds integral to the roots of Mormon culture and society.

Because he affirms these old verities and ideals and publicly admits to an appreciation of the Mormon people who go far toward embodying such familial and community values, the Mormon people have embraced Stegner as one of their own, a "dry-land Mormon," "a local boy who made good," a gentile, in Stegner's words, "who didn't turn out to be a Mormon-hater."<sup>11</sup> Because Stegner grew up among the Mormons in Salt Lake City, graduating from East High School and from the University of Utah, where he would later teach, "I can talk to Mormons, even though they know and I know that we don't talk exactly the same language. . . . They expect that I, as a gentile, will be understanding of their feeling and sympathetic with it. Indeed," he adds, "I am."<sup>12</sup>

This mutual affinity does not spring from Stegner's interest in Mormon theology, "which doesn't interest me that much," he admits, but from a youth spent in security among the Latter-day Saints, and heightened by his later historical studies of Mormonism's "usable past," especially in his *Mormon County* and *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail*.<sup>13</sup> Stegner's historical interest has been intensified by his seeing in Mormon culture, in everything from polygamy (which he un-

derstands and even defends) and the trek, to the United Order and the organization of the modern ward, the embodiment not only of family and community values, but also of the old Western themes and paradoxes, of the pull between individual and community, between a mythically powerful rural and agrarian past and a confusing, urban, and industrial present. He insists that the Mormons, in struggling to preserve and perpetuate the old verities and ideals, in an atmosphere fraught with "pressures of the loose and ad lib society," have "lost something that Brigham would have had them keep." Still, he continues, "they don't look so different from anybody else, and they do look, in some ways, more successful than anybody else" in preserving values and in retaining, in a modern society essentially inimical to transcendent and traditional Western and Mormon values, their original cohesiveness and ability to endure the pressures from within and without.<sup>14</sup>

He sees Mormons as attempting, then, with at least some success, to accomplish that which Western American writers seem incapable of accomplishing, despite the clear trumpet call which Stegner has sounded in his essays, "Born a Square" and "History, Myth, and the Western Writer"—that is, building a sense of "a personal and *possessed* past." The idealistic values for present possessors of that possessed past, including the naive insistence on optimism and hope and faith and even a sense of Manifest Destiny, provide the continuity between that present sense of a mythic, possessed past and the actual Western and Mormon present. Mormons are making a noble though perhaps ultimately futile attempt, in an America where such idealism and cohesiveness seem no longer possible, to fight a rearguard effort in shaping Saints—men and women who can stand with pragmatic feet firmly planted on the ground at the same time that their young men and women see visions and their old men and women, visions intact, dream dreams.

Stegner sees as key to this attempt to bridge the gap between the mythic and the actual, the real and the ideal, not only Mormon obedience, a Mormon sense of morality, and a Mormon sense of com-

munity and organization, but the family, the center stake of the Mormon Zion. It is the Mormon family and its values which Stegner cheers. Writing in *The Gathering of Zion*, Stegner, after confessing his admiration for the tenacious cohesiveness of the Mormon family, insists that, "The Kingdom is a more cohesive society even yet than most Americans know."<sup>15</sup> When asked by Richard Etulain what he meant in expressing admiration for "the everyday virtues of the Mormons," Stegner responded that he,

*had in mind . . . precisely what people have in mind when they speak of the New England virtues. The old-fashioned virtues, the virtues that have to do with hospitality, with family life, with the sort of welcome that strays have in a big family. In Utah, then [the 1920s], you could fall in with a family which had nine kids. You probably still can there more than anywhere else. They were big families, and they were warm and open families. They had a lot of what I'd always missed. . . . These people were so confident in their family life that they just threw open the doors in every direction. It [was] . . . but part of living their religion.<sup>16</sup>*

Stegner added to Etulain that "the Mormon family and the beliefs that sanctify it are . . . sources of a profound sense of community. . . . These people belong to one another, to a place, to a faith." Indeed, Stegner told Etulain, "The family is so important in Mormon religion that without it the religion would hardly exist." The virtues of Mormon family life are, he writes, "essentially virtues of hospitality and familial warmth, and also, quite commonly, a degree of community responsibility."<sup>17</sup>

Stegner's and Bruce Mason's admiration for the stability and cohesiveness of the Mormon family is directly linked to the virtual absence of those values in the real Stegner and fictitious Mason homes. In *Recapitulation*, Stegner, who admits that in creating Bo Mason he was exorcising his father,<sup>18</sup> returns to a theme which he has evoked in a number of his novels—that of the "wounded and bitter sons"<sup>19</sup> theme—and recreates in Mason such a son who, reacting to events which closely parallel George Stegner's real-life conduct, is angry at Bo Mason's

bootlegging, at his maintaining speakeasies in the Mason homes, at his treatment of Bruce's mother, at his eventual unfaithfulness even during Elsa's final slide toward death, at his contemptible treatment of his brother and himself, at Bo's shoddy dissolution after Elsa's death, and, finally, at his humiliating murder-suicide.

Though Mason insists, as does Stegner, that the fictional and the real families enjoyed a familial closeness,<sup>20</sup> it was because, Mason says,

*the internal strains that tore them apart also forced them together. Because they lived outside law and community, they had no one but themselves to share themselves with. They belonged to no neighborhood, church, profession, occupation, or club. . . . As a family, they shared nothing with anybody in Salt Lake. (Recapitulation, 97)*

At one point, young Bruce, a sickly, small, high school freshman who evoked only exclamations of disgust from his father, is shattered by an argument between his parents over Bo's illegal liquor trade and flees into the yard, where, looking across to the silence of Liberty Park, he feels, "as if they lived not merely at the edge of the park but outside the boundaries of all human warmth, all love and companionship and neighborliness, all light and noise and activity, all law" (*Recapitulation*, 51).

In the summer of 1925, however, Elsa purchases for Bruce a second-hand tennis racket and a membership in the Salt Lake Tennis Club. She saves her son's life by introducing him to tennis and thus to Joe Mulder, and, through Joe, to the values of the Mormon family. The Mulders, though a jack-Mormon family, successfully undertake Bruce's permanent reconstruction by showing him the deep-rooted Western and Mormon conservative values inherent in a loving, sharing, healing family. Mason recalls, that, though the Mulders,

*. . . did not tithe or go to meeting, . . . they kept the strenuous Mormon sense of stewardship. Having talents, one improved them. Having money or position, one tried to use it for the public good. Once Bruce had caught on to those attitudes, he had only one way to go. . . . He supposed he was their faith in*

*self-improvement made manifest, the object of a Mormon proselytizing impulse not lost but only re-directed. He corroborated their belief that anyone could take hold of himself and make himself into something better, happier, richer.* It was an American, especially a Western, as well as a Mormon notion. Mason had subscribed to it then, and sneakingly still did. (Recapitulation, 116; *italics added*)

In his essay, "Born a Square," Stegner speaks up for the Western naivete that rejects the notion that "Modern Man has quit" and proclaims that the "western naivete of strenuousness, pragmatism, meliorism, optimism, and the stiff upper lip is our tradition" (*Sound*, 184)—traits which sound akin to the characteristics of the Mormon family.

These American, Western, and Mormon values, rooted in an essentially conservative world view, become part of Ambassador Mason's values and of the values of many of Stegner's protagonists who, from Joe Alston, in *All the Little Live Things* (New York: Viking, 1967) and *The Spectator Bird* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), to Lyman Ward in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angle of Repose* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), to Larry Morgan in Stegner's most recent novel, *Crossing to Safety* (New York: Penguin, 1987), mirror Stegner's own attitudes in faulting many modern ways and in their penchant for surveying the past for elucidation of the present. Thus Mason admits to a woman friend that he in fact thinks that sex, if not "holy," "ought to be." "I'm that old-fashioned," he confesses. "[Sex is] Mystery, the profoundest agitation and self-sacrifice. Nothing to be cheapened or played with. Not just a jazzy incident on the pleasure circuit. Not the great god Orgasm" (Recapitulation, 220).

And when he laughs self-consciously on recalling that he had once told Nola, his date and future lover, that "You're some woman," Mason reveals a Joe Alston-Lyman Ward-like old-fashioned conservatism, conservative even for the State Department, but which would probably elicit (quiet) cheers from the majority of feminist-ridden LDS high priests. In reflecting on 1920s dating customs, Mason says that, "the females they went out with were women,

even if they were hardly more than teenyboppers. I've got a date with a woman, they said; or, I'm taking my woman to the picture show."

*They would all be told now, Mason thinks, that they needed their consciousness raised. The contemporary harpies who pass for women would probably spit on this sexism of deference, this disguised momism or whatever it was. But perhaps the boys knew something that the present has forgotten: that the only place one can first learn love is from a woman, that all tenderness, of any kind, derives from what is learned at the breast. Given a learner as insecure as young Bruce Mason, safety may well reside in some woman, mother, or lover or wife or whoever. Whether women have difficulty getting credit cards or not, it is not they who racket around through empty universes hunting for a place on which to rest. They are themselves such a place.*

*So it seemed to Bruce Mason then. So it seems to Mason now.* (Recapitulation, 145)

But as Bruce Mason, age seventy, stands by his aunt's new grave in the Salt Lake Cemetery, he is still insecure, still bitter, still suffering from the newly reopened wounds inflicted by his father; he is "the last survivor of a star-crossed family" (Recapitulation, 284). Even Aunt Margaret, he learns, has "found a real security" in the rest home. "She was one of our family," the home's supervisor tells Mason, who feels no such sense of belonging. And though, he notes, the Mormon Church's Genealogical Library will order his family and incorporate their names into "its lists of everybody who ever lived on earth, even families as migrant and meaningless as Margaret's," Mason, drawing upon that old longing for Mulder- and Mormon-family stability, opts to order his own family remains, and resolves to establish, on that hill in the secure sanctuary of the "city of the Saints," a Mormon kind of cohesiveness for his family, even in death, establish "a quasi-eternal territory for the family" (286), a security, identity, and sense of belonging that they had not enjoyed in life. He orders, for Margaret, and, significantly, for his father's long unmarked grave, headstones to match the stones of his mother and brother, with "Father"—"That will say it," he tells the sexton (267)—to be engraved on Bo's stone.

This is Mason's acknowledgement of his willingness, prompted by his intensive recapitulation of the past two days, to take a first step toward effecting a posthumous reconciliation with his father.

#### IV

In Recapitulation Wallace Stegner has brought the familyless wanderer Bruce Mason into a fruitful confrontation with his past. Still torn by the pull of the old paradoxes of the Western land, recalled in his own past and present, Mason recapitulates the past; and in his intensive recapitulation, he reviews reels of recollection and confronts anew, this time from the vista of hindsight, the unsettling disorder of his earlier personal and family life. His own instability and insecurity, then and now, are heightened by contrast with the sense of stability rooted in his perceptions of Salt Lake City and in his perceptions of the cohesiveness of Mormon families.

Like Stegner, these values have become part of Mason; and he sees in these Mormon values the potential for the greening of the American West and the American nation, where such family and community values can provide a continuity of hope between the rejuvenating idealism of the mythic past and the pragmatic realities of the present, just as they have finally influenced Mason to begin to cleanse himself of the bitterness and insecurity which have so long festered within. In ordering the headstone for his father, Bruce Mason takes a firm step toward eventual reconciliation by donning the mantle of forgiveness and love and hope and optimism and meliorism and the stiff upper lip which are central to providing a healthy continuity and cohesiveness between his own past and present. In corrigibly melioristic, Mason (and Stegner) thus evoke the same values which can serve to fuse the stirring Mormon and Western past with the vitality of the present, and anticipate, in faith and hope, ultimate success in what Stegner has called "the New World's last chance to be something better, the only American society still malleable enough to be formed" (*Sound*, 184).

#### Notes

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<sup>2</sup>See Merrill Lewis, "Wallace Stegner," in *Fifty Western Writers*, edited by Fred Erisman and Richard W. Etulain, 465-76 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982); and Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>Wallace Stegner's Family Saga: From *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* to Recapitulation. "Western American Literature" 17 (August 1982): 102.

<sup>4</sup>Forrest G. Robinson and Margaret G. Robinson, *Wallace Stegner* (New York: Twayne, 1977), 18.

<sup>5</sup>*Sound of Mountain Water* (essays) (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), 195-96. Additional quotations from this work are cited as *Sound* by page number.

<sup>6</sup>*Wallace Stegner*, 102.

<sup>7</sup>Recapitulation (New York: Doubleday, 1979). Passages cited in this article are from the Fawcett-Crest edition, 1979. This quotation is from p. 563. Additional quotations from this work are cited as Recapitulation by page number.

<sup>8</sup>Lewis and Lewis, *Wallace Stegner*, Western Writers Series (Boise, Ida.: Boise State College 1972), 82.

<sup>9</sup>Stegner and Etulain, *Conversations*, 80-81.

<sup>10</sup>Stegner and Etulain, *Conversations*, 2.

<sup>11</sup>Stegner and Etulain, *Conversations*, 121.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>13</sup>*Mormon Country* (New York: Duell, 1941); *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York: McGraw, Hill, 1964).

<sup>14</sup>Stegner and Etulain, *Conversations*, 107, 119.

<sup>15</sup>*The Gathering to Zion*, 300.

<sup>16</sup>Stegner and Etulain, *Conversations*, 102; italics mine.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 300, 120.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>19</sup>Joseph M. Flora, "Wallace Stegner." In *A Literary History of the American West*, edited by Thomas J. Lyon, et al. (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987), 982.

<sup>20</sup>Stegner and Etulain, *Conversations*, 102; Recapitulation, 96.



# Clarice Short: Earthy Academic

Emma Lou Thayne<sup>1</sup>

CLARICE SHORT WOULD HAVE SMILED to have a place in the Association for Mormon Letters. (The *Deseret News* even listed Clarice Short as being on the program herself! If anyone could arrange it, she might.) She respected what others believed and lived by. In an interview for a talk I was to give on "Women in the Utah Mormon Culture," she defined herself as "Methodist by baptism, Christian at large" and added what she often had said to me, "Utah didn't ask me to come here; I asked to come to Utah." She said, "I like what I find here. Mormon women at the university are intellectual, complete, never victimized or downtrodden, women who have a way of transcending situation." Her respect went beyond women to the patriarchal. Of broad-based, then Mormon prophet, David O. McKay, she said, "He is my conception of a saint—Luke, Peter, Old Testament Moses in one."<sup>2</sup>

Clarice, too, transcended situation. Henry Taylor, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1986, says in endorsement of *The Owl on the Aerial*:

*Clarice Short's is a voice I have loved and admired for over twenty years. It is wonderful to have this sensitive treatment of her journals and uncollected poems, and to see the genesis and development of her vision, and her stern yet generous high standards.*<sup>3</sup>

For more than twenty years, Dr. Clarice Short scared me to death. She was a gliding, suited obelisk in the halls, legendary teacher of English literature in the department at the University of Utah where I was a lowly, part-time instructor of freshman composition. Who could have suspected that this was a teacher fired from her first teaching job for not being able to maintain order in a high school classroom?

I'd never had a class from her but had heard—

who hadn't?—about her "cathedral classroom" where students quivered as she called their names only from her roll book, but where they flocked to learn from her. "I counted the days till the end of her class, took every one she taught," one told me. "I enjoyed her so much I could not stand to think of not being able to soak up what she offered."

But students were intimidated, too. "I thought she existed only in the classroom," one said. Another said that when she asked permission to hand an assignment in late because she was getting married, that deep voice sounded its knell: "Young lady, marriage is not an act of God." No one dared laugh. I suspect most would no more have ventured a casual conversation with her than I would have.

It was not until 1970 that she became more to me than that slim severe presence in the halls. It was only on the phone that I could steel myself to explain that I was completing my M.A. in creative writing, would be teaching a section of "Introduction to Poetry" and would like to audit hers. With surprising enthusiasm, she invited me to her class. I sat on the back row of probably thirty students and watched her move from Christina Rossetti to Dylan Thomas, through sonnet and villanelle, as metered and cadenced as they were. And never looking at students, she made her classroom indeed the cathedral that one of her colleagues had told me Dr. Short wanted it to be.

Out of "pressured awe," I did the assignments, kept the distance, and was surprised one day in the hall to have Dr. Short ask me about my mother, who, she had heard somewhere, was gravely ill. "She died," I said, still vulnerable to the unexpected, "a month ago." Tears welled in that stranger's eyes and spilled. "I'm so sorry," she said, lowered eyes never

meeting mine, then straightened even more and pressed on to meet her class. So this was the "steel-rimmed marshmallow" the department revered.

Jill Elledge of *Poetry Magazine* says in his appreciation:

*Clarice Short's poetry reveals the details of a life, one lived vividly, intelligently, with a minimum of fuss, but with a great deal of attention given to what might be all too easily, readily, overlooked by a less able, a less scrupulous observer. In poem after poem, we are slipped into Short's place, observing as she observes, experiencing as she experiences, feeling pain, fear, love, ecstasy as she feels each. Rarely in the poetry of our era do the poet and the reader meld as effortlessly, as seamlessly, and with as great an impact as when one opens a collection by Short.<sup>4</sup>*

Barbara Duree's portrait of Clarice Short reveals the life behind the poems. To be allowed into that life through her diaries is to be privy to the dry wit, the informed intelligence, the determination and fear the poignant love of a legendary teacher, writer, scholar, traveler, a woman of the land and its creatures.

*The Old One and the Wind*, her highly acclaimed first collection of poems, was published when Clarice Short was sixty-three. It established her as a poet worthy of critical note. *The Owl on the Aerial*, published after her death, assures her immortality as a woman imperative to know and remember.

Romantic and whimsical, environmentalist long before the term became fashionable, in her easy acquaintance with antiquity, she was "comforted by the intimacy of gods who had picnics" ("At Delphi"). Still, scholar and teacher that she was, Clarice retained a diffidence about herself as a poet, was reluctant to submit to journals with the excuse that she didn't type or hadn't the time to polish and send. But we had bets on the acceptance of them, she had a department typist help, and not one ever came back rejected. In the summer of 1971, we attended a David Wagoner poetry workshop on campus, engineered by Henry Taylor, visiting teacher in the department, friend and encourager. Her collection, submitted on much urging, was praised and many of the poems were then published in *Poetry Northwest*. In 1973 the collection became

that first book, *The Old One and the Wind*.

At the celebration reading sponsored by the University of Utah Press, Clarice Short stood regal in her long gown, deep voiced and forever wryly modest, to read to an overflow crowd from the book that would win critical acclaim for its poems and a national prize for its dramatically spare, expressive cover designed by distinguished graphic artist Keith Montague. The jacket, like Clarice, came through understated, mysterious, inviolable.

That this new book, *The Owl on the Aerial* should find its life in this season of the terror and bewilderment of the Persian Gulf War, seems somehow appropriate. I can think of no balm more comforting than access to the sturdy survival of a Clarice Short. In her steady, witty, pithy attention to the earth and its fumbling and heroic inhabitants, she transcended circumstance and bequeathed on the page her hard-earned secrets of that survival.

Unlike so many of us in a world teeming with personnel and activity, even in her constant connectedness, she lived with silences, made the most of them. She had not only time but the inclination of the poet to ingest, incorporate, reconstitute, reduce or expand, and then to offer back that input as enlivenment on a page.

As a scholar she read, taught, and produced; as a woman of the earth she imbibed and celebrated the natural world; as a respecter of ties and history and human vulnerability, she started her sallies into the public eye and warmed to the rumpled undersides of a life as wide as it was private.

Of course it would be impossible in twenty minutes to explore that total life as revealed in the 174 pages of *The Owl on the Aerial*. Instead, in passages from the work, we will taste today Clarice Short's responses to war. Poignant as they are revealing, these brief interludes tell as much as anything could of the woman whose attention to life and ability to express it I revere as I do our friendship.

Barbara Duree spent four years culling the best of Clarice from her diaries. Typical: "I could stay there in the shade and think for years."

"The cobblestones are exciting but hurt the feet."

"He had a richly kind and rather sad face. Then we walked home down the hill. There was little to say."

"It is the sort of place a man will think of when he is old and bitter and his bitterness will fade into something quiet and good."

"I have never thought much about the sufferings of Christ before, but when I see these crucifixes and the great wood carvings of the suffering of Mary with her dead son in her lap, I can well understand how to a simple person such a story could seem powerfully real."

When she was a young teacher in the summer of 1937, her first big travel adventure came as part of an intensive six-weeks' literature and language study program at the Weimar-Jens Summer College in Germany.

*July 22, 1937, Dresden. Dresden . . . is what a European city should look like—river through the middle with green shores and promenades, great parks with fountains and statues, broad streets and beautiful buildings like the Catholic church . . . If I never see anything else I shall be glad for that. It used to be the court and this great building surrounded by acres of grass and fountains. The pictures were so wonderful I hated to be herded through. To see original Corregios, and Titians, and Van Veehrs and Rembrandts was great but to see Raphael's "Sistine Madonna" was to be astounded. . . .*

*We had to start home at 4:00. Someday I'll go back to Dresden. It is lovely.*

Oh, the ironies of retrospect! Then, back home in Hays, Kansas:

*Sept. 1, 1939. This evening in the library a boy said about the constitutional amendments he was studying, "But all of this seems so futile in the light of what happened today." He said that war had started in Europe. He is very young. He has a wife and child and this summer he got his master's degree. What significance such news might have for him!*

*I remember when I was a small child in the hills and the terrible rumors came of a fierce war that spared no one, and I cried in fear. I could cry now but not for the same reason. It is as if I had heard that someone that I dearly loved had killed himself. A little over two years ago from this day Mary and I went with Frau Decker to the Kaserne. The lieutenants Brown and Schneider and Stanceroaus and*

*Munchausen were so young and joyous. They drank champagne with us and danced with us and laughed. Herr von Buttelstedt whose health had been ruined by the last war treated us with the courtesies of old chivalry. The young ones will go out now to die as cheerfully as they danced with us. What will happen to the old towns, the statue of Una at Naumburg, the narrow streets with shops that sold little saints and birds and animals carved of wood? How must Frau Decker and Frau Klug and Frau von Buttelstedt and Hanschen's mother feel now? The swans will probably go on swimming on the Schwannseebad, but will the musicians live to play Strauss and Schubert again on the terrace at coffee time in Weimar? And Roland—no wonder he has not written. He is in Vienna, and Austria now is Germany.*

*Wars do not start so late in the year. The lieutenants were too much alive to die. Two major wars don't happen usually in one generation. But it has happened. The dog days have worked their madness once more. Can some miracle not happen and make today become yesterday again?*

Instead, today became tomorrow, and the young assistant professor, now from the University of Utah, returned to Germany, again to study.

*Oct. 13-18, 1949, Oxford, England*

*Hard to write well of an experience what stirred me so deeply. It seems all rainy and misty and like the mead hall with its brief respite of warmth and light and all night and cold and death outside. . . . Left Oxford, went by bus to London . . . went second class in a little old steamer [to] Holland . . . Then on a good train into strange territory. . . . Great holes along tracks as we approached Dusseldorf. I could not find Frau Decker. I had no money. For an hour and a half I wandered about. The language was strange. The people saddened me. I saw many without an eye or missing a leg or arm. Finally I found Frau Decker and she looked like an angel to me. We looked at the shops in the Konigs Allee. They are like fresh sprigs in a ruined tree. The shops are in the first floor of buildings all empty and burned out above . . . The Germans have a way of throwing themselves completely into their hospitality that I have never met anywhere else. Herr Decker is still one of the handsomest men that I have ever seen and still one to whom my heart goes out completely. As I called*

out the names of the four young lieutenants . . . I knew in Weimar, he answered "Tod" for all except one. His own brother has never been heard of since the war. No one knows what happened to him.

On Sunday, fairly clear and bright, a young nephew with a car took [us] to see the cathedral at Cologne. Cologne is almost entirely destroyed. If buildings stand at all, they are empty and roofless. Thousands of bodies they say still lie buried beneath the unremoved rubble. And out of that devastation rises the cathedral. It is of a size and complexity that I cannot grasp. It was damaged but not fatally. The headless saint.

. . . Then in the rain, we said farewell to each other. [They] brought me to Dusseldorf. We drank coffee. We said good-by. It may be that we shall meet again but it is not likely. Perhaps it is that—the passing of time and the inevitable passing of life that makes such events so poignant.

For Clarice Short, the passing of time and life were never unattended nor untransfigured into a broader concept. In letters to Barbara Duree, she wrote:

Hays, Kansas, Jan. 15, 1943

Inadvertently I took the instructor's course in civil aeronautics regulations and passed the government exam. Now I have a class of 16 bewildered pilots, who have a very bewildered teacher. If I can succeed at it, the experience will be stimulating. Naturally, I have misgivings about teaching a subject I know so slightly. We get no money. That is a comforting thought. As it is, it seems as if one were making a slight contribution to this foolishness called war.

Hays, Kansas, Feb. 2, 1943.

Teaching English courses as well as mathematics and military science seems a hopeful sign. It would appear the government is giving consideration for peace as well as war.

. . . We women can understand the hollowness of heart within the breasts of other women. The men have only to die. The women have the harder part. No thinking person can set boundaries to his sympathy.

Among the entries in her diaries, always there were poems, in retrospect, a humorous one published in *Western Humanities Review*, published in summer 1965:

*In This War*

But much more disorder was caused by the  
irregulars

In this war, also, confusion is caused by the irregulars;  
The temperamental, the getters-ill, the fullers-in-love,  
the over-sleepers, the ultimate weepers.  
Discipline would be as sternly meted as to defaulters  
in enemy territory  
If it were not that most of the generals have  
historical perspective  
And remember that by cashiering some geniuses,  
in routine defective,  
Several martinets have earned themselves dubious glory.

In the time thereof, the metaphor, the immediate, the poignance:

March 22, 1942, Hays, Kansas

To a Carrier Pigeon in War

Your brothers in old pictures of the saints  
Slide down through rifts of cloud on golden ways;  
Your smoke-grey brothers by cathedral doors  
Receive the alms of children on bright days;  
Your shy brothers from the edge of woods  
When bees are loud on clover-whitened slopes  
And lizards bask on warm stones rooted deep.

Brother to gentlest things beneath the sun  
You bear no more through rainbow-hallowed sky  
Symbols of friendly shores. Your realms are death's  
And falcon-like he follows where you fly.

In the middle of the war, on a train, a twenty-five-year-old Clarice had a chance meeting with a ski-trooper, as romantic as anything a teacher of Romantics ever could conjure up.

Dec. 18-19, 1942. Met Mom at Dodge . . . relatives put us on the train. All the seats were taken by soldiers. We stood up an hour. Then the conductor took us back to the club car. We had fun there until about twelve. A fellow from Maine who was going to Colorado to be a ski-trooper talked to us for two hours. He seemed happy to talk. It was a rather strange little episode but pleasant. He had been a guide and spoke my own language. Perhaps he saw the woods written on my face.

Just over a year later:

Jan. 9, 1943. Large day. . . Dr. Kelly . . . wants me to take a class in C.A.R. I finally said I would. He said that I should have ridden in a plane once so we drove to Yoceminto, got a plane, a little 2-seated, 65 h.p. one, and flew back to the field here. I wondered why I had

stayed on the ground so long. The fields were like corduroy of fine wale. I loved it. Got home to find another letter from Jim, the second in two days. . . . Went to a ballgame tonight. We won 60-54. Good game. After it I worked and wrote to Jim. This hardly seems like me. May the saints look kindly upon this new venture.

Feb. 9, 1943. Had a singing feeling about the heart all day. Then tonight a box came from the florist's. I opened it. There were a dozen of the most beautiful long-stemmed red rose buds that ever came to woman—the like of which had never come to me. With them was a card that I shall treasure always, "In appreciation—the boys of H2." They were my pilots. May the God of all aviators watch over them and let them fly gloriously and land safely.

May 15-16, 1943. Heard from Jim the first of the week and found out that he could not get off the twenty-first but could get off this weekend. I threw caution to the winds and went up through the Royal Gorge to Leadville. The moon and sun shone on white peaks and life was good. From the first we were not strangers to one another. I was not Dr. Short of the English department but a plain woman visiting with a soldier, and I shall remember it as long as "the night and the river have memories."

A year and a half later:

Aug. 31, [1944]. Tonight I finished the piece that represents this summer's only writing. It has no name—perhaps deserves none, but it was written as a sort of study of the influence of a brief meeting in wartime upon two different kinds of people. It was written because I had to write it and wanted something to keep of something that is gone.

Not even the war could keep December from ending  
In Christmas, and although the posters read  
"Is your trip necessary?" people still traveled.  
Civilians feeling embarrassed and somewhat humble  
Stood back to let the soldiers go aboard  
But still clutched heavy cases bearing gifts  
And sighed contentedly to be let stand  
If they could move at all in the direction  
That their hearts led them for the holiday.  
The westbound train was late. The town meant little  
To the men who found it just a stop.  
The woman and the girl who got on there  
Were just another woman and a girl

They did not know. When the car lights went on  
Men grumbled sleepily. When pillow tops  
With gaudy flags were offered them for sale  
As "Presents you can take to folks at home,"  
A shout arose through the whole length of the car,  
"But we're not going home, we're leaving home!"  
The woman and the girl smiled at each other  
And there was the same vision in their eyes  
Of blue-edged snow across familiar fields  
And of a light in an unlighted place,  
But they had heard the cry and understood

At midnight the lights were still on in the club car  
Where a distracted porter had found seats  
For those who were still standing. The two women,  
Because they had been long parted and were together  
Forgot their day-long weariness and laughed  
At poetry they made up, one line each.  
The sleet that clicked upon the window pane  
But made them feel the bond between them more.  
They saw the soldier just across the aisle  
Who scratched off letters one after another.  
Among the many he was another stranger  
Who wore a uniform and seemed alone.  
Christmas was five days off. One does not hold  
Conventions of more worth than friendliness  
When one has lived where distances are long  
And one is warm of heart and going home.  
The trails in the wood draw close together,  
The threat of the darkness and lowering weather  
Makes brothers of birds of a different feather.  
The women were not surprised when the boy spoke,  
Something there was about him that was lost.  
They would have helped him find it if they could.  
His voice was not their voices, and his words  
Were pronounced differently, but through them sounded  
His homesickness for forests by the sea  
And inland lakes that purpled to the night.  
The older woman slept. As the night waned  
The other two compared the kinds of flies  
The trout takes in the Rockies and in Maine.  
He told of moose crashing in the undergrowth,  
She of the deer among the aspen groves;  
Both found it good to walk familiar ground.  
The cars were being shifted. With a smile  
The girl whose face bore something of the silence  
Born of great distances, held out her hand  
In farewell; and as one who sees a gift,  
Valued in childhood, sink to opaque depth  
Beyond his wading, and years after it,

*The boy asked quickly, "And if I write  
Where would the letter find you?" Smiling still  
She wrote upon the card an Indian name  
The Spaniards knew before the Pilgrims came.*

*At last she watched him go as she had known  
He would, because one could no longer bid  
The sun and moon stand still. She smiled and waved  
But did not see him, already seeing only  
The autumn darkness of days he did not share,  
The present faded, and the words she said  
She did not hear; or else her hands grew still  
Upon her work; or in the twilight barn  
She stood unmoving by the manger rail  
As dust motes floated golden in the ray  
Piercing the gloom like a slender rod of gold,  
And heard the dream-soft whisper of the hay.  
Something she kept like the memory of a star  
She wished on when a child, or the white stone  
That she had hidden away, and she could find.*

*He wrote, "We may have met for the last time  
For I must follow the wanderer's lone way  
Which I am glad you are not doomed to take.  
I used to think that there could be no friendship  
Between a man and woman. Perhaps there cannot.  
But if there could be such a shining thing  
Fallen to me, though broken, I would gather  
The golden shards and give them half to you.  
Your handclasp was as honest as a man's,  
And I shall not forget you did not question  
About the trails that I have walked alone.  
You have been with me longer than you know  
And I have spoken of you to the stars.  
Remember this, that I shall not forget  
And am a better soldier, better man,  
Because one time our paths ran parallel  
A little distance through the rain-dark woods  
When we were all as leaves moved by the wind.  
You shall remain for me a quiet place  
Out of the wind, out of the wind and rain.*

A month later, the continuing pain of war and loss:

*Sept. 20, 1944. Worked at the hospital tonight for the  
first time since last May. The old impact of pain and  
weakness was as strong as ever. We were busy. I worked  
with the kids mostly, and the boy who had just had his  
leg amputated and girl in the cast remain in my mind.*

Is there such a thing as a quick war? It was another year before:

*Aug. 15, 1945. This morning at breakfast we heard  
that yesterday Japan surrendered unconditionally  
and the war is over. The peace will be painful but the  
struggle to build things up is better than the struggle  
to tear them down. We had planned to go fishing  
and the river was about the most peaceful thing that  
one could find. The only people fishing near us were  
a couple who had lost their only son in the war.*

*Feb. 27, 1946. It is ten minutes past midnight. The  
train from Denver is whistling in. . . . This was my  
last night as nurse's aid and I need intensely not to  
let it pass with no stirrup cup. Two years and two  
months ago—a hundred years ago—I began. The  
spirit of those years will not come again.*

The poetry of Clarice Short changed, of course, grew. As did the woman who was teacher, scholar, traveler, sportswoman, as well as poet.

#### Hurt Dove

*Today among the unbound sheaves of wheat  
I found a half-grown dove with scythe-cut wing:  
I picked him up and felt his heart beat fast.  
May God forgive me that I cried to see  
Him try to flutter, fall, and creep away.  
So young and fearful in the coming night  
When blood of men is staining the dark earth  
And children hide like wild things in their fear,  
For these are strange to me and seem unreal,  
Their pain and fear is like unpleasant dreams.  
I held the little dove within my hands  
And felt the frightened beating of his heart.*

The January before Clarice died, her good friend Helen Mulder called me to say that she was in the hospital in Espanola, alone with no phone. I flew down, my first time in New Mexico, to find out how she was. None of the hospital personnel could tell me on the phone, and they obviously had no notion of who she was. As I walked into her room she was upright against the hospital mattress, oxygen tubes burrowing into her cheeks, eyelids like a turtle, pink, translucent under still-charcoal brows, her lips tight as if settling lipstick, arms crepe, veins as easy to find

as gopher runs. Under her hospital gown her bony body hung like Rodin's sculpture of the old woman, except that even then, Clarice was not stooped but erect. When she saw me in the doorway, she shook her head, smiling, "Well, my hell, if it isn't Emma Lou."

Only her hands were the same, firm but shaky, even clear polish on her nails, as she drew in pencil a map for me to follow. "You must see my place and meet my people in Embudo." She insisted I drive my rented car to her spread of orchard on the Rio Grande, to meet the Cassicks—I instantly knew why they mattered so much to her—then to drive her Oldsmobile "toy" to Taos and see her land of enchantment, the mesas, gorges, cedars, and sage, the bright blue sky, frost on one side of trees, bushes.

A nurse came by to ask how she was, if she was being good "to humor her friend who came so far." Clarice, "No, I don't humor people." Before I left, she picked up from her bedstand her handwritten "last will and testament" that she had stayed up all the night before to write, "with you as my literary executor." Moved, but awash with knowing how many others so much better qualified she might have chosen, I shook my head. "But why me, Clarice?" She answered, "Because you know. Probably for the same reason you're here."

And now, for the same reason, I look forward to this book and the treasure it will be to the memory of my friend Dr. Clarice Short. By a remarkable series of serendipities, I was introduced to Barbara Duree in Chicago in late 1985. A long-ago Dodge City high school student of Clarice's, she was retiring from thirty-three years as an editor of *Booklist* for the American Library Association. She had just discovered the existence of *The Old One and the Wind* and had begun searching through microfilmed periodicals for other short poems. Her feeling for and continued interest in the woman who "inspired me to get my master's degree and become anything at all" persuaded me to release to her copies of Clarice's diaries, letters, and papers that I had sorted in Embudo with Clarice's good friend Norma Sullivan and had given to the University of Utah library. In nearly four years of careful and loving research, Barbara Duree has produced

a memoir of Clarice made up almost totally of Clarice's own words. Jim Elledge, recent assistant editor of *Poetry* magazine and currently assistant professor of English at Illinois State Normal University, has written a critique of the poems—the poems Clarice was still working on as she died of a heart attack at that table, looking out on the New Mexico that drew her and held her and gave her her home.

Against the backdrop of today's war, her letter from Hays on January 15, 1943, captures what so many of us are feeling today:

*Sometimes I get all mixed up. It seems as if war were an end in itself and that people were proud of doing it splendidly. When it is over, and the false stimulation of it has ebbed away, people will have time to think. That will be painful. That is why I do not feel so unpatriotic as I might about teaching English. If people could be trained to "see life steadily and see it whole" they might not be hurt so much by the present.*

I like thinking about those who will meet Clarice now, so splendidly alive in her poems, so vulnerably alive in her memoir. And I affirm with William Allen White what I do know about the woman she so grandly was—"that the soul of her, the gorgeous, glowing, fervent soul of her, surely is flaming in eager joy upon some other dawn."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Emma Lou Thyne, poet, essayist, and novelist, is also Clarice Short's literary executor.

<sup>2</sup>Emma Lou Thyne, "Ashtrays and Gumwrappers: Lecture No. 6 in Women in Utah Mormon Culture," Roots and Realities lecture series sponsored by Salt Lake City General Rectrenchment Society, May 1976, published in *Task Papers*, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. Typescript, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup>Clarice Short, *The Owl on the Aerial: Poems and Diaries of Clarice Short, edited with a portrait from the diaries by Barbara J. Duree, With an introduction by Emma Lou Thyne and an appreciation by Jim Elledge* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), back dust jacket. Unless otherwise noted, additional quotations about or from Short are either from Thyne's introduction (3-9) or from Duree's portrait (73-174).

<sup>4</sup>Jim Elledge, "And Not Come Back Anymore": An Appreciation of the Poetry of Clarice Short," in *The Owl on the Aerial*, 61.

# Madwomen in the Mormon Attic: A Feminist Reading of *Saturday's Warrior* and *Reunion*

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*SATURDAY'S WARRIOR* IS THE LOGICAL climax to a homegrown style of cultural activities. This full-scale, episodic musical deals with the battle of good (family values) against evil (birth control) in a manner reminiscent of the early Saints' "us against them" survival attitude. The plot is a string of emotion-invoking scenes dear to the LDS heart, featuring smiling brothers and sisters, romantic lovers, the joy of birth, and the redemption of a prodigal son. Staged in full auditoriums throughout the West with all the accoutrements of a Hollywood production, it was, in Clifton Jolley's words, "probably the most professional Road Show you're likely to see."<sup>2</sup>

The influence of *Saturday's Warrior*, however, went far beyond the small local roadshow productions that were its literary roots. It has been termed a "watershed" play for its triumph in being the first commercially successful script that based its sales on an almost wholly LDS audience.<sup>3</sup> The show was not without its critics. Jolley complained that it "expected our devotion and sentiment to fill in for its lack of artistry" (19), and Alan Keele protested roundly that the play trivialized divine truth in such a manner that the truth would be rejected by those who were sincerely seeking it.<sup>4</sup> Still, since its first production in 1974, the play has coaxed "hundreds of thousands of people into theaters in Utah Valley, Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, and elsewhere," many of whom "had never been to a live [commercial] play before."<sup>5</sup> But *Warrior* had another sort of influence in that the folk culture it spread was often mistaken for gospel messages.

*Warrior* is patently full of LDS folk theory, not LDS theology. The play never mentions the word "Mormon" at all. Its tie to LDS canon is "preach-

ment," didactic moral messages that are only "peripherally correct."<sup>6</sup> Even the play program itself printed a disclaimer:

*Saturday's Warrior romanticizes the Mormon belief in a preexistence, the promises that are made there, and the resulting mixups that occur in earth life. It should be understood that the play's representation of premortal life reflects the feelings of the author combined with artistic license, and should not be interpreted as Church doctrine.<sup>7</sup>*

Yet both the standard grapevines and the *Church News* reported the revitalized testimonies of LDS audience members and the conversions of their guests. Typical is the report of one stake president that the local production had prompted eight baptisms and had given some cast members "a whole new perspective on what their membership in the Church means."<sup>8</sup>

In mistaking LDS folk culture for gospel teaching these members and converts are subject to the slanted versions of truth that are unintentionally preached in the play. One of the more serious flaws in the play is its rendering of women. Instead of portraying women as real people who are gospel partners with men, the stage show depicts women as subordinate, Victorian stereotypes.

In their well-documented work *A Mad Woman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar illuminate in impressive historical detail the antecedents of the long tradition of angel/monster figures in Western literature which I believe haunt the LDS outlook. This book documents the ingrained belief of the medieval, romantic, and Victorian eras in the actual "sonship" of the written text. According to that belief, an author literally fathered, with



his female muse, a posterity of "brain children"—his characters. The power to create art was thus considered exclusively male, and women attempting to write were considered presumptuous, freakish, and unnatural.<sup>9</sup> In consequence of this social outlook, the female images that we inherit from the literary traditions of these eras were created by men—even women who did publish (often pseudonymously) did not publish alternative feminine models.

The types of male-created female characters most prevalent in the Victorian literature are the seemingly extreme opposites that Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate as silent Snow White and the self-destructive Queen. Snow White is representative of the idealized eternal, unchanging woman, never aging, brought to life only at and for the desire of her prince. However, once brought to life, Snow White marries the prince and becomes the queen. Therein lies a danger for the prince. His angel, like all Victorian "angels in the house," is expected to have power, not only to run the house, but to give birth, which implies dangerous power over the next prince. As Gilbert and Gubar explain, the angel of life may deny that life or give death—the angel may be a much repressed demon who wants out.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the submissive Snow White's alter ego is the aggressive, fiendish Mad Queen who embodies male fears: first, the fear of male inability to completely suppress the independent impulses of women, and, second, fear of the power of attraction that women have over men. Because some men unconsciously both love and fear women, the characters they "father" are often an ambiguous combination of the two extremes—Angel Mother, or Fallen Angel. The roles assigned, as anthropologist Sherry Ortner explains, "can appear from certain points of view to stand both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture's hegemony."<sup>11</sup>

The characters in *Saturday's Warrior*, male and female, all seem to be exaggerated clichés, due, in part, to the manner of the play's humor and even more to the writing style which gave more time to evolving the episodic plot than developing characterization. The author settled for stereotypes that plainly show the influence of the Victorian culture. While the male characters are shown leading lives

of action, the women's lives are almost all passive. The men are shown questing, proselyting, sinning and repenting, "sailing on," and "free,"<sup>12</sup> the women in the play are put in the orbital positions of Snow White and the Mad Queen, revolving as various manifestations of Angel and Monster around the active sphere of men.

The play opens with a "Female Soloist" singing the title song, "Saturday's Warrior" (11-12), a song about glorious children reserved to be born in the last days of the world:

*Who are these children coming down, coming down,  
Like gentle rain through darkened skies,  
With glory trailing from their feet as they go,  
And endless promise in their eyes?  
Who are these young ones growing tall, growing strong  
Like silver trees against the storm,  
Who will not bend with the wind or change  
But stand to fight the world alone.*

These children are seen as coming down from the premortal world to learn their life's purpose—which is to march forth as strong, mighty warriors to win the battle for the hearts of men. To be more accurate, the soloist sings alone only during the first four-line verse dealing with the children "coming down like gentle rain." For the next partial verse, describing how the young ones grow like trees, she is joined by the women's voices in the chorus. Once the strength and battle images are mentioned in the song, the men's voices join in. Delicately and unintentionally, a point is made: women may bear and rear children and even sing praises to the Warriors, but the men are to fight the battles. Though the point seems almost ridiculously subtle at the start, it is made repeatedly throughout the play. This interpretation is verified most strikingly in Reprise #1 of "Paper Dream" (58), which Julie and Tod sing together. The words of this reprise describe the people they would "like to be":

<b>JULIE</b>	<b>TOD</b>
<i>A girl with courage in her brow, Who's licked her doubts And fears somehow... (she stops)</i>	<i>A man with courage in his brow, Who's licked his doubts And fears somehow, A warrior of great nobility!</i>

Tod is destined to be a warrior, Julie is not. Even though the battle is purely spiritual, there is no female equivalent for Julie to pattern herself after. All she can do is trail hesitantly off into silence.

The first verse of "Saturday's Warrior" also exposes some traces of male dislike of the birth process over which they have no control. The description of "children coming down" (11) from heaven is a description of birth. The premortal world is therefore a place where women have power; indeed, it has a Matron for a director. It is a waiting place where a man is trapped until, through the woman's ability to create a mortal body for his spirit, he can progress on his journey in mortality. Thus, he is damned, checked in further progression, until his angel mother releases him.

In the opening scene, Tod and Julie, the romantic leads, are preparing for Tod's imminent departure into mortality. Tod Richards is all man (note that he even has two masculine names) and anxious to get on with life, while Julie is all frustrations. The scene is humorous, the humor focusing on the contrast between Tod's awe and excitement in the opportunities before him, and Julie's fears that Tod will forget her. Tod's first words are a complaint about all the waiting he has to endure while his mother is giving birth to his body—protesting the power his mother has in frustrating his desire for immediate action. He attempts to speed things along by demanding that someone tell him what is delaying his progress. Obviously it is important to him to get out of this premortal womb place where women hold the key to the door.

"Suspicious" Julie, on the other hand, "her frustration mounting," is not so excited about Tod's departure. Even in her angelic premortal state she shows signs of becoming a jealous monster. Breaking into tears, she accuses Tod of lust: "All you can think about is getting down to those physical bodies!" (13). Julie is certain that Tod will be born handsome, therefore attractive to many women, and she is afraid to the point of tears that she will be born "plain" (14). Even here in the incorporeal world Julie recognizes the need to be an art-object/ Angel to hold her man. Tod has loved her eternal

self, but on earth she will no longer be eternal, but monstrously decaying. Tod reassures Julie, and they break into an indistinctly poetic love song which claims that, as certainly as the sun rises and sets, and all warm and tender things breathed by lips, their love will continue forever and ever. During the song Julie, in answer to Tod's promise to (actively) search the world over for her, promises to (passively) wait for him. "Forever."

Our first view of mortal Julie is in another farewell scene (29). This time she is at the airport to see her fiancé, the new Elder Wally Kestler, off on his mission. Again she is depicted as silly and overly emotional. Her first words are, "Oh, Wally, I think I'm going to cry." Kestler chides her, demanding, "Is this the girl who swore to unconquerable fortitude and pioneer zeal?" This scene is exaggerated for comic effect, of course; we laugh at the weeping female and the hyperbolic missionary. But beneath the comedy in the rest of the scene is a more serious message, a message that will be overtly stated several times during the play: no matter how innocent they seem, women are not to be trusted.

Kestler tries to remind Julie of her promises of fidelity by quoting from a document that he has made Julie sign: "Whatever hardships I am called to endure . . . whatever pain I am called to suffer . . . yet I will be a woman of courage and true strength . . . until that glorious day when Elder Kestler returns in triumph!" (29)

Kestler is in a bind. He recognizes at some level the paradox that if he wants to keep inconstant Julie angelically waiting for him, she must become a woman of strength, a whole being rather than the delicate angel girlfriend that he enjoys. An angel, by literary definition, cannot endure in the absence of the man within whose relationship she exists. She will of necessity find either a coffin or another man to relate to. In order to keep Julie from becoming the possession of a new man, Wally has to allow her to be a true mortal woman for two years—but he has put in an escape clause at the end of the contract. She need only be strong until he returns to take over the strong role again himself. Yet Kestler wants it both ways. He confides a few lines later,

"And all I ask in return for being the world's greatest missionary is to know that my girl will be waiting for me when I return in glory" (30). Kestler wants an "angel girl" reward, not a woman.

Julie's relationship to Wally begins its transformation from angel to monster almost immediately after Wally's departure. Inevitably, her letters to Wally change from monster prodding "work harder" mixed with angel waiting "I will love you eternally" to just monster silence as she forms a new relationship with a lonely man who needed "understanding" (50).

At this point something interesting happens. The stage directions read "Enter ELDER GREENE who kneels at KESTLER'S Feet shining his shoes" (51). As the long-suffering Wally writes his next letter, he lists the virtues of his new companion who is "terrific" (51). He doesn't complain, does everything Kestler asks, has a good sense of humor, and even remembers him from the preexistence. In other words, Kestler informs Julie that he has found an eternal companion with all the desirable qualities which Julie herself now monstrously lacks. And, "Our motto is work! Work! Work!" Kestler doesn't even need Julie as a monstrous prodder. Greene is a perfectly satisfactory angel/mother who will sit at his feet adoringly, take care of his clothes, and inspire him to new heights. It seems a man can have all his needs taken care of by another man better than by a woman, particularly since the provider is part of the man's sphere. Elder Greene understands the pressures and problems of mission life far better than can Julie. Kestler's righteousness in leaving women and going on a manly mission (there is no hint in the play that missions are possible for women) has earned him freedom.

Kestler still wants his angelic reward, however, and, on discovering Julie's duplicity, sobs, "How can I go on without the girl I love?" (53). His companion helps him find an active way—complain about women and work harder to show the monster that he is better than she is. This hard work eventually results in the conversion of Tod, who, as was foreordained, will get his reward for joining the Church in the form of the girl the missionary

left behind. Julie has managed to wait for him through using her energies trying to become an angel, or, as she writes it, "the best wife in the world . . . a perfect housekeeper . . . a wonderful cook" for another man (even in her diary she pens herself into culturally endorsed fictions of perfection). Julie's quest to be a perfect angel is ordained by forces beyond her control. Her destiny is to be a perfect wife; and, as the chorus reprises in "Circle of Our Love," her role is "In God's eternal plan . . . forever" (59). Everything works out as it should, "Forever and Ever" (94).

Shakespeare neatly sums up Julie's earthly behavior in Lear's speech:

*Down from the waist they are Centaurs,  
Though women all above;  
But to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
Beneath is all the fiends"* (King Lear 4.6.124-27)

Angel/Monster Julie spends the play vacillating between her dual aspects. Her older sister Pam, however, is presented as the ideal Mormon woman, one with "eternal optimism" who "never complains," is "always cheerful," and "is too good for this rotten world" (46-47). In short, she is all angel in attitude as plainly as she is all angel in body.

Pam is at first as much an art-object as is Julie. In the preexistence, her brother Benjy playfully announces her forthcoming birth "Fellow citizens of the planet Earth . . . Just arriving in all her birthday glory—the incomparable Pam Flinders!" (18). According to the stage directions "The CHILDREN cheer and applaud as PAM moves gracefully into the SPOTLIGHT where she strikes a dramatic pose, covering her private parts" (18). Her twin brother Jimmy, however, merely "takes his place next to PAM" (18). While Jimmy jests that he fears in mortality he will be "so physically attractive" and "dashing" that no one will notice his "sweet spirit" (19), Pam jokes "Well, of course, being a girl . . . my number one fear was that I would have nothing *but* a sweet spirit to notice" (19). Good looks are a possible burden to a man; to a woman they are a necessity. Pam continues, stating that her desire is "with beauty or without . . . [to] dance my way through life." Her fears will be realized, not her

hopes for joining the dance of life. Pam, in mortality, is literally cut off from her monster parts and entombed in a wheelchair—a half-dead angel so pure that her feet never touch the ground.

Pam spends much of the play separated from the action of her family's life. While her family gathers in the house and argues, she sits outside gazing into the heavens, feeling "smaller and smaller" (45). This little woman, like Louisa May Alcott's fading Beth March, is a household saint, serving all her family, but most particularly her twin. When Jimmy turns to her for advice that he cannot get from his father, she sweetly tries to transform him from a "mixed up radical teenager" to "Sir Galahad" (46) in just a few sentences. Jimmy rejects being made into her fantasy figure so she finally bears her testimony. In the song "Line upon Line," Pam presents a scripturally supported concept that "Line upon line, precept on precept" God gives his earthly children knowledge and guidance. Yet she presents it in passive way, claiming that "if we are patient we will see/ how the pieces fit together in harmony" (48). She does not mention the efforts of searching or repenting, but rather advocates simply being "patient," implying that if we receive the "wisdom" as the earth receives a "summer shower," all will be well, "we'll live with Him forever!" (48). Though she encourages "warrior" Jimmy to look at the heavens for himself and not to throw away a "whole universe of opportunity," she repeats for herself her own creed that "until it happens" we should be patient.

For all her angelic attempts to manipulate Jimmy into being righteous, Pam is unsuccessful on earth. When Jimmy runs off to "experience the bitter debaucheries of life" (79) she is separated from her prince, and, being unable to follow him into hell, she must of necessity retreat to heaven, essentially sacrificing herself to save him. It is her death of unknown causes, not her doctrinally sound yet passive advice, that finally brings her lost, lonely brother Jimmy to begin his journey back to his family. Having suffered the common fate of the literary angel, Pam now joins her miscarried sister Emily in

some Mormon limbo for those who died before they really lived and continues to watch over and encourage her brother.

While *Saturday's Warrior* is a play that portrays Mormons as many Mormons wish to be portrayed, Tom Roger's *Reunion*, also written in the 1970s, is a serious attempt to portray Mormons as they actually are.<sup>13</sup> Time does not permit a full discussion of *Reunion*. Though the characters and situations in this second play are somewhat strained in order to include a wide span of Mormon types and dilemmas (Rogers jokingly calls it Mormon soap opera),<sup>14</sup> still the playwright has made careful effort to recreate authentic conversations and circumstances he has witnessed. *Reunion* documents the struggle of LDS women trying to fit into the modernized Victorian mold. In it the mother gradually suppresses herself into silencing migraine headaches to avoid become a monster. Her more active daughter, finding herself insufficiently angelic to catch the "best" Mormon mate, tries to prove her monster status by opting for an affair with a cigar-smoking married nonmember. As Gilbert and Gubar have observed, "It is debilitating to be *any* woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters."<sup>15</sup> And that warning is exactly what *Warrior* professes.

The underlying message of *Saturday's Warrior* is definitely less positive than the testimony building, Church-validating image for which it is revered. Like a monster behind the angel facade is the message that a woman's role is to be happily subservient and, if she fulfills that destiny, that all will be well in Zion. This simplistic message ignores the consequences of female passivity: date rape, wife abuse, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, disorientation and identity loss once the children are grown or when a spouse dies, economic and emotional dependency, etc. Yet this message will persist as long as Church members place leftover Victorian culture above inspired truths or continue to equate sentimental feelings with true spiritual messages. To do either closes us off from the real progress achievable by both men and women under the guidance of the gospel.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Nola D. Smith is a master's candidate at BYU majoring in theatre history and criticism. The material for this paper was condensed from an early draft of her thesis entitled "Saturday's Women: Female Characters as Angels and Monsters in *Saturday's Warrior* and *Reunion*," defended April 1992. Nola lives in Provo with her husband Parley and three daughters. This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 25 January 1992 at Westminster College of Salt Lake City.

<sup>2</sup>Clifton Holt Jolley, "Saturday's Warrior: 'Medium May Not Merit the Message,'" *BYU Today*, November 1975, 19.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Bliss, and P. Q. Gump, "Mormon Shakespeares: A Study of Contemporary Mormon Theatre," *Sunstone* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 58.

<sup>4</sup>"Trailing Clouds of Glory?" *Sunstone* 6, no. 4 (July-August 1981): 44.

<sup>5</sup>Bliss and Q. Gump, "Mormon Shakespeares," 58.

<sup>6</sup>Jolley, "Saturday's Warrior," 19.

<sup>7</sup>Harold Lundstrom, "'Saturday's Warrior' Wins Applause in Two States," *Church News*, 19 April 1975, 10.

<sup>8</sup>"Musical Strikes Conversion Note," *Church News*, 9 July 1975, 10.

<sup>9</sup>*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 6-8.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 25-28.

<sup>11</sup>As quoted in *ibid.*, 19.

<sup>12</sup>Douglas C. Stewart, *Saturday's Warrior* (Orem, Utah: n.pub., 1974), 26, 87. Additional quotations from this work are cited parenthetically by page number. Ellipses are used freely in Stewart's original instead of other punctuation.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas F. Rogers, "Reunion," in Roger's *God's Fools: Plays of Mitigated Conscience* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983).

<sup>14</sup>Personal conversation, fall 1991.

<sup>15</sup>*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 53.

# "A Usually Dazzling World": The Poetic Mormon Humanism of Emma Lou Thayne

Richard H. Cracroft<sup>1</sup>

IN HER DISTINGUISHED and most recent collection of poems, *Things Happen: Poems of Survival*, Emma Lou Warner Thayne, exults:

*I am delighted. My life goes well.  
I must say it as clearly as I can  
before I'm gone.  
So little delight there can seem in the world.  
Almost as if it's shameful or naïve  
to love what is there.*

The poet falls asleep cataloging a variety of earthly delights and eager to "be delightfully surprised by tomorrow,"<sup>2</sup> by what she describes in another poem as "a usually dazzling world."<sup>3</sup>

In her poems of more than two decades, Thayne celebrates, with increasing skill and craftsmanship, the human delights of Being in "a usually dazzling world" and rendering that world more understandable through the transforming graces of poetry. But Thayne celebrates the world as a thoroughgoing Latter-day Saint poet whose essential Mormonness is not Mormon Veneer or Mormon Admonitory but Mormon Innate—Mormon Warp-and-Woof—a hopeful, optimistic (but never Pollyanna-ish) confidence in life here-and-hereafter in a dynamic universe in which "all things bear record" of God and his purposes (Moses 6:63), and where, though "it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things," "men [and women of comparable age] are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:11, 25).

Insisting, with Robert Frost, that "earth's the right place for love," or anything else, for that matter, Thayne the humanist scrutinizes her own particular experiences in such a way as to suggest real affinity with the experience of her fellow mortals. Her uncommon craftsmanship in finding and celebrating, in moving

and memorable language, the transcendent meanings to be found in the commonplace enables Thayne to transcend a "merely humanist" label to become a rare and remarkable Mormon humanist poet.

## II

The publication of *Things Happen: Poems of Survival*, her tenth—and her best—collection of poems so far enables a broader assessment of Thayne's artistic achievement and a deeper understanding of the dynamics of her essentially Mormon vision overlaid with an optimistic humanism. One of Utah's and Mormondom's most published poets (one thinks of university poets Clinton F. Larson and Brewster Ghiselin, of regionalist John S. Harris, the late May Swenson, and Carol Lynn Pearson—though only Swenson and Pearson have attracted national audiences), Thayne's poetry has appeared primarily in such regional and LDS-centered periodicals as *Roanoke Review*, *Wasatch Front*, *Folio*, *Network*, *Utah Holiday*, *Relief Society Magazine*, *Exponent II*, *Ensign*, *New Era*, *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, and *BYU Studies*; but most importantly in her ten collections: *Spaces in the Sage* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Press, 1971); *Until Another Day for Butterflies* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Press, 1973); *On Slim Unaccountable Bones* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Press, 1974); *With Love, Mother* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975); *The Family Bond* (Salt Lake City: Nishan Grey, 1977); *A Woman's Place* (Salt Lake City: Nishan Grey, 1977); *Once in Israel* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1980); *How Much for the Earth?* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1983); the essays and poems of *As for Me and My House: Meditations on Living and Loving* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989); and her

most recent collection, *Things Happen: Poems of Survival* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991). She has also published a novel, *Never Past the Gate* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1975), about youthful adventures in the family's beloved Mt. Air Canyon.

Educated at Salt Lake City's East High School and the University of Utah, where she took a B.A. in English and an M.A. in creative writing, and earned membership in Phi Beta Kappa, Thayne has managed a number of roles—as wife of realtor Melvin E. Thayne, mother of five married daughters, and grandmother to sixteen (1991); as member of the Young Women's Mutual Improvement Association general board, as long-time member of the *Deseret News* board of directors and, for several years, a member of Mountain Bell Utah's board of directors; as member of both the Utah Endowment for the Humanities and the Utah Arts Council Advisory boards; as high school teacher, LDS Institute instructor and, for thirty years, as part-time instructor of literature and creative writing at the University of Utah; as political activist member of the steering committees of Women Concerned about Nuclear War, and Utahns United Against the Nuclear Arms Race—for which cause she wrote and published *How Much for the Earth?* in English (later translated into German and Russian by Walter Arndt); and as an accomplished, life-long tennis player: the 1979 champion in both the singles and doubles division of the Western Region Senior Women's tournament; ranked no. 3 nationally in the 1980 Senior Women's doubles division; and no. 20 in the 1983 Senior Women's singles division. She has also served as coach of the University of Utah Women's Intercollegiate Tennis Team. (It must be especially *rankling* for Thayne to hear Robert Frost's likening of free verse—her *métier*—to “playing tennis with the net down.”)

Thayne's audience, primarily regional and Latter-day Saint, has honored her several times: Brigham Young University's College of Humanities, with the David O. McKay Humanities Award; the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce with their Honors in the Arts award; the Association for Mormon Letters for Best Book of Poems (1982), Best

Book of Poems (1985), and Best Book of Essays (1989); *Dialogue*, in 1987, for the year's best poems; the Southwest Regional Teachers of English/Language Arts with the association's Author's Award for 1990, and, in 1993, the Association for Mormon Letters with honorary lifetime membership.

### III

Though seldom explicit in her poems, Emma Lou Thayne's vantage point on the world is Mormon-Cockeyed. Through one lens of Thayne's personal but shared Urim and Thummin, one looks vertically into a beneficent universe charged by Mormon eternity and energized by the conviction that human beings are children of God and beneficiaries of the atonement of Jesus Christ; this spiritual vision permeates all of her work. Through the other lens one looks horizontally, to see men and women as mortally parenthesized, free agents who walk by faith in a twilit, perilous world which is nonetheless fraught with purpose, hope—and adventure.

This theocentric self-consciousness is a gloss for understanding Thayne's poems—an under- and overriding vision so self-evident that it must seldom obtrude though it always obtains. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, Thayne believes “in [Mormonism] as [she] believe[s] the sun has risen, not only because [she] see[s] it, but because in it [she] sees everything else.”<sup>4</sup>

In “Affirmation,” from her first collection, *Spaces in the Sage*, she admits that this faith, this “passionate intuition,” has been a *donnée* in her life and seldom the occasion of intense personal struggle:

*I don't know why I know:  
Believing goes so often skittering  
From those who need and grasp the most;  
Then what incredible (as always) Grace  
Makes me its doubtful, easy host?*<sup>5</sup>

Even one of her few “questioning” poems, “Heretic,” an early rhymed couplet which recalls some of the aphoristic verse of Carol Lynn Pearson, affirms what Thayne calls elsewhere the “divine at work in our lives.”<sup>6</sup>

*Indulge  
my searching  
my unsteady voice:  
You share  
the blame;  
it's You  
who gave me  
choice. (Sage, 39)*

This sense of an active personal providence, while not exclusively Mormon, nevertheless permeates Thayne's work. In a recent essay, she acknowledges the presence of the divine as integral to her writing: "If I trust it—the Muse, perhaps, or the higher sources of inspiration, the Light of Christ, the Holy Ghost," she writes, "what is beyond my conscious command can lend reason and sometimes even calm to whatever needs me most" (*House*, 26).

Occasionally Thayne wears her faith on her poetic sleeve, as in this very personal segment of "Over the Wailing Wall," in which she recalls the efficacy of faith, prayer and a priesthood blessing after becoming paralyzed through a tennis accident which also caused a tumor and blindness:

*I prayed again: "Dear Heavenly Father, I have five children who need their breakfast and a love that is unfinished." My brothers and husband came with oil. I smiled when I knew in my mind what would happen. I could feel the heap of warm hands on my head and the oil moist like morning.*

*The operation never happened. Only the doctors were surprised.<sup>7</sup>*

In "Conversion," one of Thayne's earlier poems, she comes closest to making the kind of direct statement found in the Mormon poetry of so many of her contemporaries—but, instead, anchors in travel imagery her expression of faith:

*I forget when I'm away  
the throb, unsolicited as hurt  
that inundates my reason.  
Often exiled in doubts  
inflamed by dogma's small discipleship  
I pull away  
sure the hand I feel in mine  
leads anywhere but here.*

*But here again,  
some quiet note can resonate  
in chambers secret and persuasive  
as being homesick  
on a trip designed to get away.*

*And I come surging home  
to You.<sup>8</sup>*

Usually, however, Thayne is more oblique in evoking faith as a stay against the dark, as in the final poem of *Once in Israel*, where, flying homeward into the dawn, she writes with confidence of,

*the light rising  
to illuminate the coming dark:  
a greyhaired woman moving  
to the profound certainty of  
petition, past the beloved settings  
of this world. (Israel, 79-80)*

In an essay, Thayne urges readers "not to be so bludgeoned by input and activity that life and connectedness to the eternal go unnoticed" (*House*, 113). This connectedness becomes appropriately and movingly explicit in the lyrical beauty of Thayne's hymn, "Where Can I Turn for Peace?" in which she asks, from amidst the din of life, "Where is my solace?" and "Where is the quiet hand to calm my anguish?" She describes Christ's response:

*He answers privately, Reaches my reaching  
In my Gethsemane, Savior and Friend.  
Gentle the peace he finds for my beseeching.  
Constant he is and kind, Love without end.<sup>9</sup>*

#### IV

Although Emma Lou Thayne the Latter-day Saint is profoundly aware of the ubiquitous presence of the Otherworldly in mortality, Thayne the humanist is decidedly in thrall to the Thisworldly, and it is with uncommon self-knowledge that she prefaces *Spaces in the Sage* with a quotation from Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*: "I mustn't forget I'm alive. . . . I mustn't forget it tonight or tomorrow or the day after that."



While Thayne may base her *Weltanschauung* solidly in Mormonism's expansive cosmology and theology, her poetry is rooted in *Lebensfreude*, in wonder at being alive in a "usually dazzling world." "Passion, even rapture survived my childhood," she writes in *Things Happen* (27), and exclaims, in the recent poem, "Poet," about writing verse:

*If you have anything to say it is  
Here I am  
no one in particular  
and everyone.  
Neatly nailed together  
built to fly apart.  
Burning under the glass  
of my own eye.* (Things Happen, 65)

In this poetic self-scrutiny Thayne features herself and her experience, like Walt Whitman, as "no one in particular and everyone," as a type for others also in transit through a mutable mortality. Against a background of transcendency, Thayne celebrates, as representative woman, the miracles of the commonplace, of life's dailinesses (Sage, 36; Things Happen, 41, 47).

And, amidst her celebrating, another minor poetic miracle occurs, as Thayne departs the pattern of so many faithful poets and resists the tendency to wax didactic, to sermonize, to drive home the point. Writing of this common impulse in Mormon poetry, Bruce W. Jorgensen asserts: "Our Mormon trouble is that we usually want a poem to mean too obviously, want it to preach, teach, expound, or exhort rather than to represent a human intelligence responding to experience."<sup>10</sup>

Thayne's respect for her audience, her subject, for language, her craft, and the function of a poem keeps her from falling into this didactic heresy; and she leaves to the reader the generalizing of her particular experience into human and universal meaning.

Even when she centers the examination on her family, as she so frequently does, Thayne avoids the sentimentality and sententiousness inherent in such subjects and keeps the poem under control. For one who finds much of her personal identity in her family, writing with skill and control about fam-

ily is a test of her art—and Thayne passes the test. In this respect, "First Loss," one of her many fine "family poems," is a proof-text for Thayne's disciplined poetics. She evokes, at the poem's conclusion, the resonating image of a snowbank angel to convey the twelve-year-old girl's response to the death of her grandmother, with whom she had long shared a bed:

*That night my mother barely touched my hair  
And in stiff, safe mechanics twirled the customary  
Corners of my pillow one by one. "Grandma's gone,"  
She said. Crepuscular against the only light  
Alive behind her in the hall, she somehow left.  
My covers fell like lonely lead on only me.  
I lay as if in children's banks of white where  
After new snow we plopped to stretch and carve  
Our shapes like paper dolls along a fold.  
Now, lying on my back, I ran my longest arms  
From hip to head, slow arcs on icy sheets,  
And whispered childhood's chant to the breathless  
room:  
"Angel, Angel, snowy Angel,  
"Spread your wings and fly." (Butterflies, 28-29)*

Another reason that Thayne is successful in evading the sentimental, the smug, the self-righteous, and the specious in writing about things intensely personal and familial lies in the fact that her poetic celebrations of dailiness and the Mundane Particular are muted by the darker shadings of her Mormon imagination, haunted as she is by a sense that she and humankind are strangers who have tentatively entered this "frail existence" from "a more exalted sphere."<sup>11</sup> There hovers over her verse the sense that the delights of earth are short-lived and fleeting. This awareness of "change and decay" imparts to her verse—particularly about family—a poignant sense of the poet's clinging fast to the earthy, the familiar, and the comfortable as a stay against inevitable loss or change.

The effect on her verse is deepening and enriching, linking the here and the hereafter in the ageless "Death is the mother of beauty" theme. In "Knowing that Most Things Break," Thayne shows how this anticipation of impending and inevitable change enhances the commonplace present and past:

*You fondle routine's  
tattered strings  
hugging dailiness  
blown  
from room  
to room  
by dusty  
urgencies  
bent  
against  
remembering.* (House, 55)

Such wistful *Sehnsucht* (longing) has become even more intense in her recent poetry, precipitated by a bizarre accident in July 1986, in which Thayne was nearly killed while driving on the freeway with a son-in-law. A mudflap support either fell from a diesel truck or was flipped up by the tire of a truck ahead of them, crashed through the windshield, and shattered her face and temple (House, 107; *Things Happen*, 57). Several surgeries and many months of painful recuperation have given Thayne a survivor's perspective, deepened her appreciation for health, for life's comfortable routines, and for the transitory nature of all that one hugs near and holds dear.

This tension between the desire to hug the familiar yet accept inevitable change is underscored in Thayne's poem, "To a Daughter about to Become a Missionary," in which Thayne focuses impending changes with lines describing her daughter's final preparations prior to departure:

*She is changing to  
the garments of The Word, will take on  
the terrors of the verb To Be,  
not knowing yet why departure  
spells return.*

Then, returning to the now-departed missionary's bedroom, she looks with a mixture of feelings at the unmade bed, and realizes, "She is gone,"

*And me unable to touch it [the bed] for fear  
of blanketing the sweet shiny smell  
of Dr. Pepper lip gloss beneath the down,  
above the furrows of knees along the floor.*  
(House, 83-84)

In "Come to Pass," a recent poem, Thayne again demonstrates control of language and emotion as she speaks aloud to her long-deceased mother—in their beloved cabin in Mt. Air canyon, near Salt Lake City (a home place which figures in much of Thayne's poetry and life). Still delighted by this world, Thayne is haunted by changes past and by changes anticipated. Determined to present a courageous front to the unknown inevitable, she clings to comfortable old artifacts which now speak to her with various and profound meanings:

*This house is one half yours, Mother.  
Still.*

*On close terms now with death, I live  
in your quarters, among your mirrors  
and closets, disclosed as you were  
by how I muffle my agonies  
and celebrate the sunlight.*

*If shutters make their geography  
over the lace of your curtains,  
I summon your naming of things  
to fit the coming dark: Gumption  
Stick-to-itiveness. Heart.  
Blessedness.*

*Coming to pass.* (Things Happen, 24)

## V

As her volume of verse, *Things Happen*, attests, Emma Lou Thayne links her Mormon vision and her human delight through consummate poetic craftsmanship. In "Dancer and I," for example, Thayne, ostensibly recording her observations of a skilled dancer performing, likewise suggests her own responses to the craft of poetry:

*As I watch, astonished,  
what I hunger for  
is not what I know I cannot do.  
But for this cocksure witness  
to what I know some other human being can:*

*The summoning of summer to a song,  
the color of plum to a line,  
the translation to the mother tongue  
of what there is in flight.*

*Following the dancer, the cascade of discipline and  
abandon like the trill of an impossible note,  
I am consumed by beauty.*

*It is not envy nor even desire that engages me:  
All is the lifting by the tongues of bells.  
Here. Now.*

*Toes buttocks fingers instincts  
tingle with places to hold and take off from  
knowing for once How. (Things Happen, 26)*

With deserved confidence in herself and her craft gained through the "cascade of discipline," Thayne has mastered the ability to summon "summer to a song," to isolate and vivify personal experience through a warmly human poetic imagery unequalled in contemporary Mormon poetry—surely Thayne's poetic forte. She describes a mood as being "Mellow as the Sunday roast on Sunday air" (*Butterflies* 16); or the effects of a bath: "hurrying / seeped out of me like moisture from / A swimming suit hung unwrung out to dry" (*Things Happen*, 70); or evokes summer rainstorms with:

*Thunder rivets me to waiting  
for stuttered light  
that must have been  
as July sloshes off  
its sweat in gutters turned  
to rapids  
by the rain. (Butterflies 11)*

Or, in "First Rain in a Dry Season," the coming of the rain,

*Flashing in the gray night  
liquid strips of laughter  
peeled the sky  
onto the shudder of leaves,  
and mists nodded into each other like sleep.  
(Bones, 30)*

Or the rain in "The Beautiful Complexity," which becomes haiku-like in its compactness:

*My yellow floppy hat  
makes creases on the wind.  
Bullets of rain  
beat us to the barn. (Butterflies 8)*

Thayne's earthy imagery, alive, warm, and emotionally compressed, evokes her accustomed poignancy, as she dips or bobs or slides into nostalgia, her favorite mood, to sit, "captive on the crinkled edge of childhood" (*Butterflies*, 50), and see her past life, "compressed like yeast," rising before her and crying out for expression before it is lost; and, in "Sunday," another poem of Whitman-like listings, she reminisces on early Sabbaths spent at the Mt. Air cabin:

*The taste remains  
like sage and nutmeg and salt  
back of every breath,  
the pungency, the savor  
of Sunday stirring its own air  
into mine. (Bones, 43)*

In numerous poems, Thayne's imagery functions emblematically, evoking correspondence between the now and the to be. She reflects this in one of her several birthday poems, "Birthday: The Forties in Late October":

*The Fall would seem  
a likely time  
to turn toward  
fifty.  
In the garden maples wear  
a startling echo  
of the frost  
and burn against  
the yellow aspens,  
beauty born of  
blaze and chill  
no green could  
ever know. (Sage, 37)*

"Sunday School Picture," one of the best of Thayne's earlier poems, brings together her Mormon past and her penchant for recollection and allows her to soar, by means of rich and evocative imagery, from the photograph of the "biggest Sunday School the Church has ever / let exist" to examination of two of her childhood selves, based on the fact that,

*In the picture  
that President Heber J. Grant had them take  
that auspicious day (three shots overlapping)  
I came out twice, being on the edge of two of them.  
and Mother always said that would guarantee me  
two chances at perfection, but I being seven  
at the time figured so? and went on becoming  
two people instead.*

The first self is the tomboy companion/buddy/playmate with her brothers, the sister who would,

*try not to sit by Richard when I needed  
to be nice in church  
because he was the brother  
that I got the giggles with like when we sang  
You-hoo unto Jesus and had to leave all the time  
hunching up the searing aisle acting like  
we had the nosebleed.*

The second self is her feminine, thoughtful, religious self, which played dolls and read Pollyanna and,

*wrote a poem  
drying my tortuous ringlets by the radiator  
in the bathroom about spilling batter  
on the blue kitchen floor that pale Miss Crawford  
announced I must have copied somewhere.*

In the conclusion Thayne unites the two "wandering selves" in nostalgic recollection and vivid imagery:

*Sometimes I look  
at that thousand-peopled picture when I'm sorting  
things and marvel a lot, and even otherwise, I find  
myself saying, Highland Park Ward, my roller  
skates still rattle down your dented driveway, and  
my absent waiting is sometimes done against the  
brown banisters below the Garden of Gethsemane  
in your raised entry.*

*and mostly, your organ  
churns under its outside loft across the filled  
fields where our short-cuts are long buried  
in old foundations,*

*and like the green-grained oak  
of your chapel doors, it closes with gentle right  
my separateness and gathers my wandering  
double selves together. (Butterflies, 60-63)*

In her most recent collection Thayne's imagery becomes, more than ever, integral to the poem's structure, linking the here with the out there. In "Interlude on the Trans-Siberian Railway," for example, Thayne recreates her four-thousand mile railway journey between Moscow and Irkutsk, and images her various selves as a familiar toy, a seven-part nest doll, the innermost self being the Holy Ghost:

*By the last, the fifth day  
in our cindered, no-shower, genial sloth  
I had become my favorite toy from Moscow:  
a nest doll bulging red and yellow alive  
inside itself seven times:*

*my outside—the sky, the countryside;  
inside it—the train, our car;  
inside it, our compartment, people;  
inside it, my berth above, distance,  
aloneness;  
inside it, a book, a journal, a prayer;  
inside it, inside of my head,  
inside of my body;  
last, the tiniest, far inside, God,  
the Holy Ghost  
there  
telling me how to reverence being  
inside at all.*

(Things Happen, 40)

Perhaps Thayne's fusion of art and vision, her understated connections between form and function, between matters mortal and eternal, is best illustrated in one of her most recent and finest poems, the Association for Mormon Letters' prize-winning "Meditation on the Heavens," published in *Things Happen*:

The three-part poem is a fine *pantoum*, a rare verse form in which the stanzas are quatrains rhyming *abab*; the second and fourth lines of one stanza reappear as the first and third verses of the following stanza; and in the final stanza the first and third lines of the first stanza recur in reverse order, the poem thus ending with the same line with which it began.

In part one, "The Comet Is an Angel Wing," Thayne explores the link between her own poetics and her faith through peering at Halley's Comet: "An angel wing was on the beach / A celestial body grounded for our view / One late night looking for the comet."

In part two, "The Comet Is a Darting Light," Thayne relates the comet, "A supernatural sight of extraordinary beauty and significance," to the theophany of "Joseph [Smith] in the grove, fourteen," who also experiences "A supernatural sight of extraordinary beauty and significance / While praying for a truth that had eluded others." "My church owns the story," she explains:

*Joseph in the grove, fourteen  
Not unlike Joan, young Buddha, or Mohammed  
While praying for a truth that had eluded others  
From unusual encounter the gift more than surprising.*

Joseph's vision of God and the angel, she asserts, "had to be believed, the unbelievable / In unusual encounter, the gift more than surprising," just as the comet which she locates with only a pair of binoculars, though others could not, also had to be believed.

In part three, "The Comet Is Remembering," Thayne connects the "comet in my scalp"—the comet which she has realized through her imagination—with her childhood memories of the painting of the First Vision by Lee Greene Richards which hung in the Highland Park Chapel, of "Joseph kneeling at the elevated feet of the Father and the Son." Asks Thayne, "Did the artist put it in—the vision—or did I?"

The ineradicable impression of the painting on her imagination, as the comet on her mind, was "indelible on knowing," and "more real now than the Sacred Grove I occupied one grown-up Sunday." Likewise her own certitude of Joseph Smith's experiences is quickened in her—less by her visit to the physical Sacred Grove than by her own imaginative perusals, over a quarter of a century, of an artist's imaginative rendering of the First Vision.

Thayne concludes "Meditations on the Heavens," surely one of her best-crafted poems, with:

*Not until today this small comet in my scalp  
Indelible on knowing, like the features of a mother  
giving milk:  
In the chapel of my childhood against the organ  
loft:  
the vision. (Things Happen, 61-63)*

## VI

For her readers, regardless of their beliefs, reading Emma Lou Warner Thayne's poetry is, as she has written in another context, like "tast[ing] summer / a healing juice / dribbling down my throat" (*Israel*, 73). Uplifting to the human spirit, Thayne's poetry enables the reader to effect reconciliation between the finite and the infinite, between human spirit and Holy Spirit, between the dynamics of a Mormon universe and the *joie de vivre* of mortality. Her optimistic humanism, voiced before the panorama of her innate Mormon vision, restores one's perspective, and, as Thayne puts it, "make[s] light / of where I've been and give[s] new ableness to going / where I have to go" (*Israel*, 23).

While acknowledging the darker and unpredictable incertitudes of the "usually dazzling world," Thayne celebrates in poem after poem the healing and holy "light" which dazzles the individual with earthly and ephemeral delights while illuminating a brighter and infinite destiny, just over the horizon. Thayne unites these impulses in "When I Died," a very recent poem. Pointing out that if she seems, of late, "at a distance," and preoccupied,

*and more and more  
connected to night . . .*

*it is that I am occupied:  
by the light that tells me  
where I have been and will go and  
listens with me in the ringing  
and rejoicing of having had the time.  
(Things Happen, 59)*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Richard H. Cracroft is a professor of English at Brigham Young University. A born-again presider, he has presided as a Mormon bishop (Provo Bonneville Ward), stake president (Provo

East Stake) and mission president (Switzerland Zurich Mission), admist stints as dean of BYU's College of Humanities and chair of the English Department. He presided over the Association for Mormon Letters, 1991-92. This paper was presented at the Association for Mormon Letters session at the Rocky Mountain Language Association, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, 20 October 1991.

<sup>2</sup>*Things Happen: Poems of Survival* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 67. Additional quotations from this volume are cited parenthetically in the text as *Things Happen* by page number.

<sup>3</sup>Emma Lou Thayne, *On Slim Unaccountable Bones* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Press, 1974), 48. Additional quotations from this volume are cited parenthetically in the text as *Bones* by page number.

<sup>4</sup>"Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), 92; see also Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), item #188.

<sup>5</sup>*Spaces in the Sage* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Press, 1971), 9. Additional quotations from this volume are cited parenthetically in the text as *Spaces* by page number.

<sup>6</sup>*As for Me and My House: Meditations on Living and Loving* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 48. Additional quotations from this volume are cited parenthetically in the text as *House* by page number.

<sup>7</sup>*Once in Israel* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1980), 45. Additional quotations from this volume are cited parenthetically in the text as *Israel* by page number.

<sup>8</sup>*Until Another Day for Butterflies* (Salt Lake City: Parliament Press, 1973), 50. Additional quotations from this volume are cited parenthetically in the text as *Butterflies* by page number.

<sup>9</sup>*Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 129.

<sup>10</sup>"Imperceptive Hands: Some Recent Mormon Verse," *Dialogue* 5 (Winter 1970): 23-24.

<sup>11</sup>Eliza R. Snow, "O My Father," *Hymns*, no. 292.